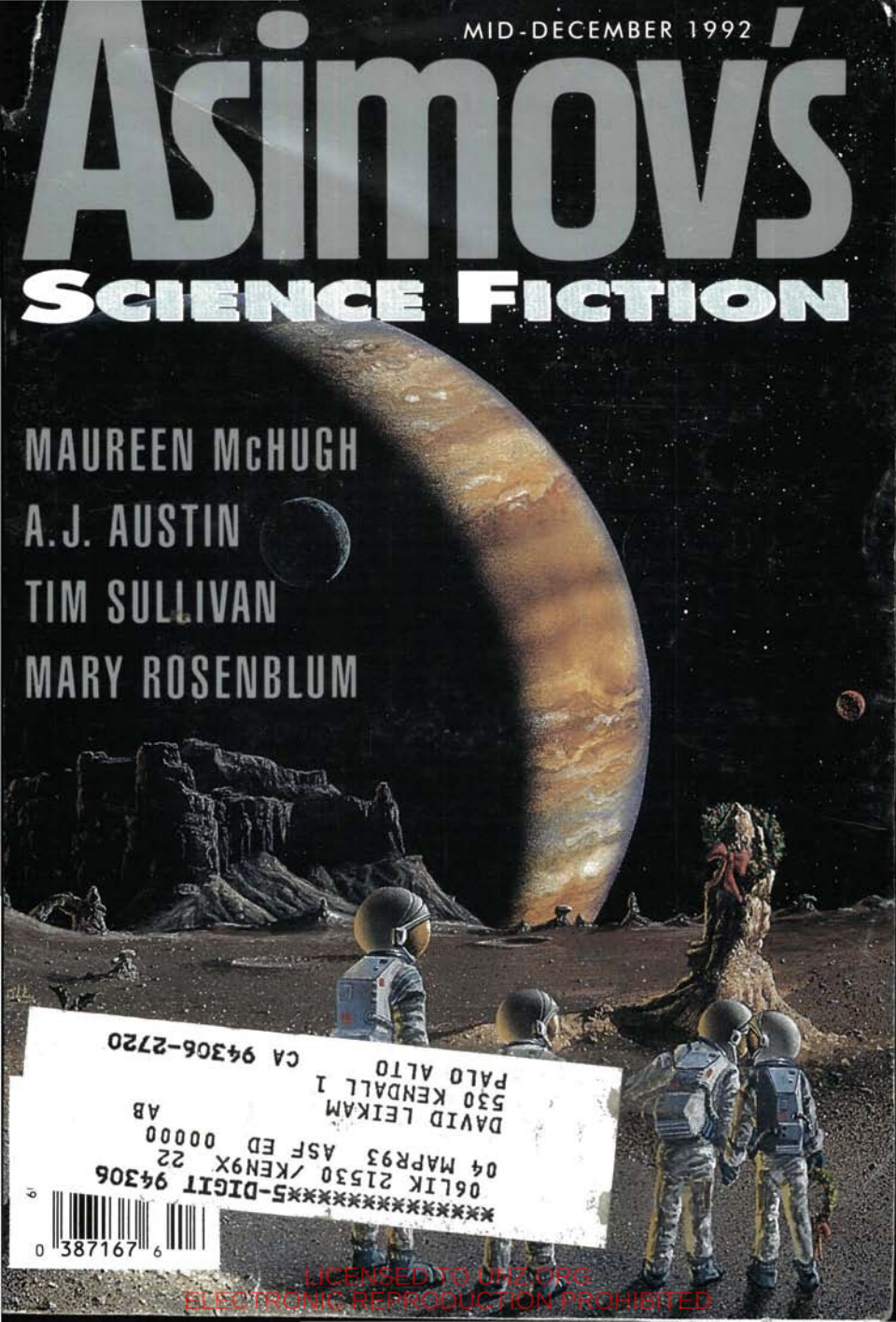

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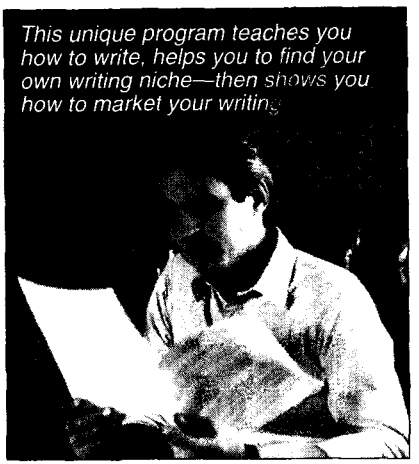
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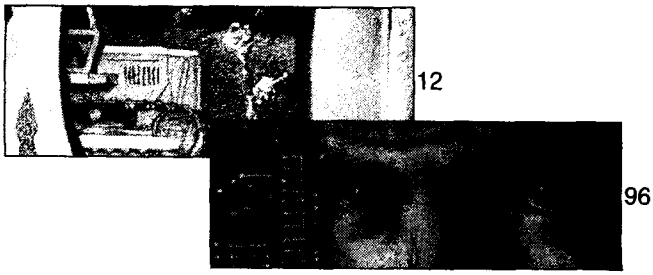

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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Mid-December 1992
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December 8, 1992

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Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977–1992)
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Stories from *Asimov's* have won seventeen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received seven Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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READERS' MEMORIAL: ISAAC ASIMOV

Some of the many, many poignant letters we received from readers soon after the death of Isaac Asimov make up this moving tribute to him. As Isaac said in one of his last editorials, letters are a unique form of literature. "They communicate directly from one person to another, often revealing thoughts and feelings that are sometimes hard to say aloud." We want to thank each person who wrote in to the magazine for sharing those thoughts with us, and for making this eloquent memorial possible.

When I was about eight years old, I picked up a book called *I, Robot*. It was hanging around my elder brother's bookshelf, and I liked the intriguing picture of a translucent robot skull on the cover. It was the first book (without pictures) that I ever read from cover to cover, and it began a life-long fascination with science and sf. I didn't know at the time that I had tapped into the works of the greatest living writer of the genre. As I grew and looked to the works of others in the field (some really extraordinary talents, like Clarke, Heinlein, Bradbury, Doc Smith, etc.) I realized that by pure accident I had discovered the best, first.

During the course of the next twenty-five years I never stopped reading his books. Not just the science fiction but all the ones on all of the other subjects. I found myself trashing my recommended Physics textbooks during the course of working toward my Physics "O" and "A" level exams (UK), and turning to his *Understanding Physics*. This frustrated my teachers, but I passed with excellent grades.

I have found it virtually impossible over the years to find fault with his logic. The penetrating and lucid style that Dr. Asimov used to bring common sense to the most nonsensical subjects (politics and religion spring to mind), and to the most complex of sciences has reached deeply into me and shaped me at the most profound level.

I am grateful for Isaac Asimov's contribution to my life. I considered him to be something of a mentor, and even though I never got to meet him I miss him already. Please give the condolences of a "friend" to his family.

Robert Godwin
Bulington, ONT
Canada

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I am very saddened by the death of a truly remarkable man, Isaac Asimov. The pain and shock force me to write you of this. I feel like I have lost a best friend and a role model that has been with me all of my life (forty years). When I was sick, he would cheer me up. When I was depressed, he brought a smile to my face, he even accompanied me on my honeymoon. Isaac was always there. Science, science fiction, histories, limericks, mysteries, etc., etc. . . . I read them all. I had the pleasure of meeting Isaac at Star Trek and World Cons. And have many hours of audio tape of his talks that I truly treasure. I also introduced my son to his children's science books. The loss of Isaac brings a void to all our lives that no one can ever fill. His intelligence, humor, and humanity are to be celebrated by all. Isaac once said that as a humanist he believed that after he died there would be nothingness. I hope just this once he was wrong. Isaac, your thoughts, humor and humanity shall be with me for the rest of my life and your genius will live on for many generations to come.

David Wax
Ottowa, ONT
Canada

Dr. Asimov retained all his life a thing that many SF writers a third of his age lost early in their careers: a sense of wonder. Galactic empires, robot detectives, time machines, levitating professors, sentient trees, extradimensional lovers, barren alternate Earths, space-hopping teenagers—all of them came to vivid, unforgettable life from his powerful brain. When

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Editorial Director
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you sat down to read an Isaac Asimov story, whether a short-short or a multi-volume epic, you knew you were in for a good time. In his hands anything—whether a planet with six suns or a human-robot detective team—became plausible; he took his job seriously and made sure that the science and the characters made sense.

Through his writing Dr. Asimov reached more people and affected more lives than any hundred politicians could have, and the world will mourn his passing. We weep for the loss of a true giant, but will keep on going and keep on writing, for the best way to repay him for all he did for us is to promote knowledge as he did and write science fiction to the best of our ability, which he certainly did.

Goodbye, Dr. Asimov—you'll be missed.

Thomas Cron
Riverdale, GA

Science has lost its greatest interpreter. Science Fiction has lost its greatest author. The world has lost its greatest living legend. My sympathy goes out to all of you that have lost a great friend.

Anne Samit
Dearborn, MI

Like millions of other people, I will miss new additions to the corpus of Isaac Asimov's delightful writing once what is now in the pipeline is exhausted. Soon there will not be any new brilliant stories, thought-provoking editorials, or enjoyable non-fiction books from The Good Doctor. How fortunate that he was so prolific, so that we do have so much of his writing to read! He has left behind a priceless legacy that will inspire generations of scientists and science fiction writers yet to come.

There have been, are, and will be plenty of good science fiction writers and a few great ones—but there is and will always be only one Isaac Asimov. The entire world, not just the realm of sf, is a lesser place without him.

All I really want to say is, Thank you, Dr. Asimov, for what you gave us. Thank you for all your stories, all your nonfiction books, all your novels, all your editorials and articles, and the magazine that bears your name. Your spirit will survive in your works as long as people read and reprint them—and that shall be for a long time to come.

Freya E. Harris
Atlanta, GA

I am writing this note to express the enormous sense of personal loss I have over the passing of Dr. Asimov. He wrote so prolifically and personally over the years that it was possible to find out as much about him as I would know about a close friend. He has had a profound influence on both the smallest of my assumptions and the limits of my view of the universe. He has been a treasured guide and teacher to me for many years. Time and again his positive tone, wise counsel, sense of humor, and exhilarating imagination have lifted me up.

There is more than a little of human history, ancient and current, that makes me want to turn my head in shame. But as I grow older I keep meeting people (some of more ordinary ability . . . others,

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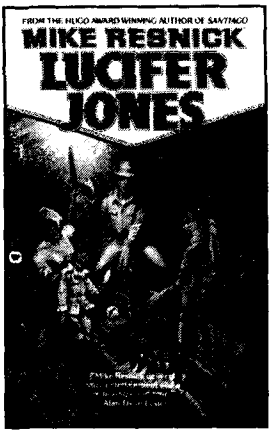

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like Dr. Asimov, with astounding ability) who restore my faith in human potential.

I have lost my favorite author. Others, much closer to Dr. Asimov, have lost much more. My heart goes out to them.

To all those who feel his loss, I am proud to say: I too love Isaac Asimov.

John E. Parsons, Jr.
Chesterfield, MO

The staff of *Black Belt,* and *M.A. Training* would like to offer their condolences on the loss of Mr. Asimov. He was an extraordinary man who left an impression on millions of people across the world. His vision of the future was one marked by peace and understanding, and he will be missed.

David W. Clary
Marian K. Castinado
Santa Clarita, CA

The typewriter has fallen silent, the Master has departed. I cried, for Isaac Asimov was my friend and mentor, though we never met, spoke, or corresponded. He had an impact on my life greater than any writer I can name.

Yes, the Golden Age of science fiction is twelve. In 1964, I read the Foundation trilogy for the first time, and began an affair that has lasted twenty-eight years. I fell in love with the mind that produced Susan Calvin, R. Daneel Olivaw, Lije Bailey, and faithful, valorous Robby; the wondrous universe of Hari Seldon, the Mule, Trantor, and lost Earth; George and Azazel; the Black Widowers; and so much more.

From him, I developed a love of science, of rationality in the face of ignorance and superstition. The world opened to me through the words he strung together like jewels on a rare and beautiful string. His prose is so clean, so transparent, that the ideas shine with their own light.

I was a charter subscriber to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine,* and I have never failed to renew (though I nearly slipped, twice). Though the staff has changed over the years, the quality remains in the stories and poems, a legacy of thought and imagination that stands as a tribute to the memory (yet green) of the finest master of the genre we shall ever know.

If the only true immortality is in the memory of those who are impacted by a life, then Isaac Asimov has merely abandoned his body, to live on in all of us.

Keith R. Ernst
San Bernardino, CA

Isaac Asimov was a great man. His joyous spirit and passionate dedication to rational inquiry were infectious and inspiring.

Although I never met him, like so many others I felt I knew him through his works, and that he had befriended me—and I guess I came to rely on him. He was always there, churning out his dozen books a year, fighting the good fight for reason, truth and human well-being, and doing it with a wonderful verve and panache. There is so much to say about him, but right now all I want to say is that I'll miss him. And that I think perhaps the best way any of his admirers could pay homage to his

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memory is to revere life and learning as he did.

Goodbye, Isaac Asimov. And thank you.

David M. Brown
New York, NY

Dear Doctor, I would just like to say that the world would not have been the same without you. I would not have been the same without reading your many wonderful books both fiction and nonfiction. I'm entering my first year of college this coming fall and I don't think I could have made myself work hard enough without the inspiration of your books. Thank you very much.

Ron J. Rattie Jr.
Ridgely, MD

And so, if tears ever came to my eyes, it was while reading the dear Doctor's editorial in the June issue—received just a few days after his passing—in which he spoke of slowing down and leaving us.

Think of it, through a half century of his selfishness, he gave us men of steel and compassion, brought the past to life, and made the present more comprehensible for all of us. No small feat for any human being, but he did it better than anyone else.

Thank you, dear Doctor, for all you've done. We will never forget you.

Frank Warner
Lompoc, CA

When I was a child, I always thought that Dr. Asimov was immortal, at least that is what I always hoped. I remember signing out Lucky Star stories from the library despite the stern looks of the librarian who thought I was too young for this type of literature. I remember the joy of finding an Asimov science fiction story in my school reader in eighth grade. The class never read it, but I did. Much later, I remember searching book racks at the train station for something good to read on my daily commute to and from college. Finding a new book by Isaac Asimov, or even a book with a quote from him on the cover, made my day. He remains the author whose titles I check out first.

I cannot imagine science fiction or fact without Isaac Asimov. I have had the enjoyment of his books and stories for my entire reading life, and I will miss additions to his literary collection.

Frank S. Karl
Akron, OH

I couldn't help it. I cried and cried about the death of my hero, Isaac Asimov. If anyone deserved to be immortal, he did. Oh, not just in order to keep writing wonderful sf stories, but for his beautifully clear writing on science and *life*. We will need not just his fiction, but his wisdom, and caring. It was obvious that he cared about people, not only in his characters, but in his politics and in his delineating problems and exhorting us all to see and work on them.

We should heed his warnings and Think Globally. Care more about long term effects—in all things. Don't add to overpopulation. Care more about people, stop building bombs. Further freedom of speech. Encourage free choice. Write clearly. Throw out superstri-

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tion and religion. Realize that's not the same as evicting morality. Be good. Be honest. Move closer to downtowns and don't make a "hole" in your city. Halt censorship. Don't take war—or other problems—to the stars. Treat all people, black, white, female, male, Martian, as equals. Read more. Learn more. Laugh more. Tell limericks. Make puns. Clean your planet(s). Value science. Value all education. Think more. Cherish science fiction.

Take his lessons to the stars, after applying them on earth.

Remember him.

Bibi (Kathe) Sandstrom,
proud owner of 2 Asimov
postcards and one kiss.
Indianapolis, IN

Isaac Asimov's books have given me a great deal of pleasure down the years, and although there are many I have not yet read, I am sorry the flow of entertainment—including his editorials—has come to an end.

I extend my sympathy to his family, and to you, the staff of the magazine. I am sure you will also be missing him. Remember, even though the Editor Emeritus has gone, the magazine lives on, and I hope will continue to encourage new writers to the field as it has done in the past. Not only his writings, but also the magazine bearing his name is his memorial.

Alec M. Jones
Aberdeen
Scotland

THE LAST NIGHTFALL

The flow of words through the universe has
slowed perceptibly.
Unborn ideas mill aimlessly, their birthdates canceled,
Their father gone, Libraries freeze in shock,
Then shrink a little, like widows bent by grief.

In the echoing Caves of Steel, under the Naked Sun,
The Gods Themselves turn pale at the End of Eternity.
Foundation and Empire pause in their colossal struggle.

The three laws are whispered in positronic reverence
And oily tears roll down every metal cheek.

Ashley J. Hastings
Plano, TX

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"Gold"
by Isaac Asimov
(*Analog*, September 1991)

Best Short Story
"A Walk in the Sun"
by Geoffrey A. Landis
(*Asimov's*, October 1991)

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Best Fan Artist
Brad Foster

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A.J. Austin

SUPPLY·RUN

A.J. Austin, a long-time veteran of "talk radio," now hosts the "Middays Show" on WPOP in Hartford, Connecticut. Mr. Austin's short stories have appeared in *Analog*, and his novel *To Save the Sun*, co-written with Ben Bova, has just been published by Tor Books. "Supply Run" is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

art: Laurie Harden

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"Where the hell *are* we?"

"That is one fine question, Jim." I gave him my best reassuring smile and tapped at the console again. Once more it reported that our heading was flat and true. One look out the window, however, told us differently. We were just coming up out of a dip in the landscape and it was getting hilly, too much so, and to make things worse the hills were appearing on the wrong side of the cab. The early dawn shadows from the hills and rocks, not to mention our own shadow, should have been straight out ahead of us instead of angling off to our left.

I wouldn't say the kid was scared, but it was obvious that his first overnight surface trip was turning out to be just a little less fun than anticipated.

"No big deal. I'll call Moonbase, straighten it out. Better wake Tracy up," I suggested, nodding to the back of the Traverse Vehicle. The TV's weren't all that comfortable to even *ride* in, what with all the swaying and rolling motions they made, much less sleep; but I swear that guy could doze off in a cement mixer. "Go ahead, now. Get him up." Jim smiled nervously, glad to have something, no matter how small, to do.

I slipped on the headset. "Moonbase, this is TV four-two-niner. Come in, controller." I waited as long as it should have taken for a response. "Moonbase transit controller, this is TV four-two-niner. Copy, please." Again, nothing. I tapped in one of the construction frequencies and gave that a try too, but had no luck there either. Same thing with several of the other comm channels.

"What's the problem, Rudy?" Tracy asked sleepily as he plopped into the co-driver's seat to my right. With not quite enough room remaining in the cramped cab of the TV, Jim put an arm over the back of the co-driver's chair and squatted between the seats, trying not to look too spooked.

"Well, apparently we have a guidance control problem of some kind. Seems to be functioning normally and swears we're on course, but take a look outside." Tracy glanced at the dashboard readouts, then out the windshield.

"What—we're heading northwest," he muttered when he saw which way the shadows were pointing. He reached for the keyboard of the guidance computer and tapped in a few commands.

"We already tried that," I said. "The back-up won't come on-line because *it* doesn't see anything wrong with the main either."

"And I heard you trying the radio when I came forward." I nodded. Tracy tried a few more commands on the computer, checked a couple other readouts. All showed green lights. "Damn. It's obviously got to be something wrong with the rooftop. Antenna system must be out." He looked at me and shrugged.

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"Is that bad?" Jim asked, sounding for all he was worth like he didn't really want an answer.

We were nearing the bottom of another one of the low depressions, so I waited till we were level, then disengaged autopilot and slowed the TV to a stop, taking the tracks out of gear as I did, and looking around. Could be worse; the depression could have been deep enough to put us in the dark. With the soft hum of the engine fading in the background, I looked over at Tracy and gave him a wink. "Yeah," I said, with just the slightest hint of foreboding. The kid's eyes grew large for a second, until I added, "That means we'll be late, and no on-time bonus for the overnighter."

Tracy burst out laughing and I couldn't help joining in. Jim looked back and forth at us, then allowed a big smile to spread sheepishly across his own face. Thank God the guy was finally lightening up a bit.

"Okay, let's see what we've got," I said, calling up a map on the guidance screen. Touching the screen near the center caused a yellow cursor to appear beneath the tip of my finger, marking the spot. "We checked in here at 0700." I tapped a few more keys and a small circle formed around the cursor. "Since we were on course then, and since we've kept cruising speed at 40 kilometers an hour—what time is it?"

Tracy looked at his watch. "Almost 14:30."

Pressing a few keys caused the circle to expand. "All right, make it 300 to 310 klicks, max, that we're off, assuming the worst; assuming that whatever broke down, broke right after we checked in this morning. And since it looks like we've been going northwest . . . that puts us right about, uh, here." A wedge-shaped section of the circle blinked, then expanded, filling the screen.

Jim cleared his throat. "Well, judging from the terrain, I'd guess we're somewhere near the southwest edge of the Riphaeus Mountains." He smiled broadly, pleased that he'd been able to offer some useful information.

"You know, I think he's right." Tracy leaned forward and pointed at a bright ridge on the horizon. "That rim we can see up there must be one of the Euclids, then."

"Okay, problem solved," I replied, grinning back at the boy. "We aren't lost anymore."

Jim leaned back until he was clear of the tiny cab and stood up, cramped joints popping loudly. "What now?"

"Well, let's take a break and get something to eat," I said. "Then we'll pull up out of this hole and Tracy'll suit up—"

"Oh, lucky me," he groaned, making his way to the TV's galley.

"—he'll suit up, go outside, and get a clear fix from the navigational beam off the space station at L1. When we're ready to go, we just point

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the TV at Gassendi A and keep it going in a straight line across the Ocean of Storms, nice and slow."

"It'd be simpler just to fix the antenna, wouldn't it?" Jim came forward and sat in the co-driver seat.

"Right, kid," Tracy called sarcastically from the tiny galley. "You rated for that kind of work? Unless it's a matter of life and death, you don't mess with *anything* that's not in your job class. Or didn't they tell you about Moonbase's 'you-break-it-you-buy-it' policy?"

"He's right," I explained. "If the situation was really serious, which it isn't, we'd activate the location beeper and just stay put until help arrived."

"Yeah," Tracy put in, "and assuming the locator actually worked, all you'd have to do is live down the embarrassment of being rescued for some silly malfunction once they led us back by the hand."

I shot a dirty look in the general direction of the galley. "Anyway, we're not in any real trouble so there's no need. We know the directional's out, so once we're pointed in the right direction all we need to do is climb out every couple hours or so and verify with L1 that we're still heading to the research station at Gassendi. When we're within range we can use the suit radio to home in. We make delivery while one of their techs—who's *rated* for it—fixes the problem, then we go home. It's no big deal; the antenna's just not worth screwing with out here."

Tracy came forward with a tray of shrink-wrapped sandwiches and coffee, and the three of us chatted idly while we ate. The sandwiches came from the same shipment of supplies we were delivering to the facility, and weren't bad. We wished, not for the first time, that the food normally stocked in the TV galleys tasted this good; but the outpost facilities always got better grub than overnight truckers. There was a whole series of jokes about "TV dinners," and Tracy and I had been making deliveries at Moonbase long enough to have heard them all—and to have made up more than a few ourselves. I felt kind of sorry for the kid, though; getting a decent meal like this on his first overnight haul would probably spoil him.

After lunch I revved up the TV and began pulling it back onto level ground while Jim helped Tracy get into his hard suit. Once clear of the depression I spotted a nice, flat area up ahead a few hundred meters from the shadow of a large hill and angled the TV in that direction, figuring Tracy would be suited up right about the time I got to it. They were running through the systems check when we felt a violent *whump!* from the right side of the cab. The sudden lurch knocked both of them off balance and sent Tracy's helmet clattering across the rear cabin. It rolled forward into the back of my seat when I pulled the TV to an abrupt halt.

"Jesus H. Christ! What the hell was that?" Tracy shouted from a heap

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on the floor. Jim helped him to stand upright in the clumsy suit while I stared out the windshield, carefully scanning the desolate landscape for some sign of what was going on.

Jim hopped into the seat at my right and pressed his face to the side window. "There's a small crater about a meter from the rear track," he announced with surprising calm. "No damage that I can see, though. The trailer looks all right."

Tracy leaned into the cab as best he could in the suit. "There!" he said, pointing almost straight ahead into the shadows. "There, see it? We got company."

I followed his extended arm and, yes, there was something out there. The running lights and illuminated windshield of a small crawler were visible, once you knew where to look, just inside the terminator of the long shadow thrown off by the hill. I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like it was facing us head on, and must have pulled up sometime while we were eating. Although the crawler itself appeared stationary, I could make out something else, something smaller, moving ahead and to the right of it.

"Surface suit—" Tracy started to say just as the man stepped into the oblique sunlight. It was still relatively early—the lunar daybreak had occurred a few hours after we'd checked in at 0700—but there was no mistaking the tan and red hard suit as being anything but Russian issue. He was armed with a surface assault rifle, and as soon as he'd stepped into the light he dropped to one knee, sighted, and fired.

Again the TV shuddered, worse than before. Even without the confirmation of the sudden alarm now blaring from the dashboard, it was apparent we'd taken a hit.

"What the hell is he doing?" I shouted to no one in particular, then without really thinking about it I slapped the locator with the palm of my hand. The lighted button started blinking reassuringly, but I didn't have a clue if it was really functioning properly. "Are we secure? Jim, check it." He quickly tapped out a sequence of commands on the diagnostic and checked the readouts, one of which blinked an urgent red.

"It's the cargo trailer. Right rear track's been hit, but I can't tell how bad it is." The kid was doing fine and I was impressed at how much better he handled a real emergency than appearances had suggested earlier when he thought we were lost.

The Russian was gone when I looked up from the display; he'd apparently stepped back into the shadows right after firing. I looked closely and spotted him bounding back to the crawler.

"Punch up the international hailing channel on the suit radio. Put it on external." Tracy immediately obliged. It took a second for him to find

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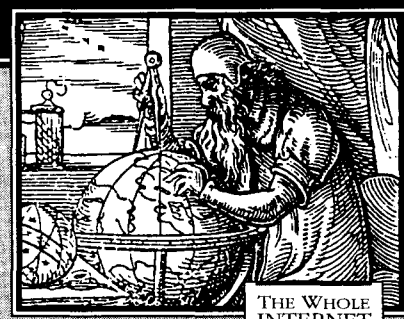

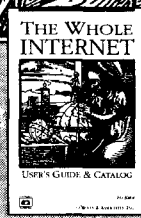

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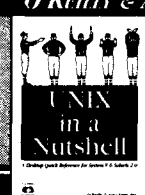

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the right setting, but then all three of us could clearly hear the reception through the speaker mounted in the chest of his hard suit.

"—area. Under the conventions of the treaty between Moonbase and Lunagrad, dated August 2023, you are trespassing in an area that has been designated a Commonwealth secure zone. Please transmit identification and purpose. Please cease all forward movement and allow your vehicle to be examined or searched. You have entered a Russian restricted area. Under the—"

Tracy cut the signal and thumbed the suit radio into send. "This is Tracy Borcher, co-driver of the Traverse Vehicle *Blue Stallion,* identification TV four-two-nine, on a supply run to the research station at Gassendi A. We have a malfunction in our antenna system. We are unarmed and non-hostile; repeating, we are unarmed and non-hostile. Please signify copy."

"—trespassing in an area that has been designated a Commonwealth secure zone. Please transmit—"

"Great. Standard English warning tape," I said. "Whoever that is out there probably doesn't know a damned word of English."

"He's moving!" We looked out the window and, sure enough, the running lights of the crawler were shifting quickly to a point ahead and to our left. After covering maybe fifty meters, staying in the shadow the whole time, the driver brought the crawler to a stop and swung the front around to face us once more.

"He's trying to disable us," Tracy observed soberly. "He wants to take out one of the tracks on the left side, too."

"But why?" asked Jim. "Didn't he hear our ID?"

He was openly nervous now; so was I, and started flashing the forward lights in hopes our attacker would recognize an old-style S-O-S. "Maybe he did. Or not. I don't know. My guess is he picked us up when we were still a couple klicks off. He's probably been running that tape for the last hour. He didn't get an answer and we kept on coming, so he took it upon himself to come out here to meet us when we stopped at the bottom of that depression. Then when we popped up and headed straight for him, he started shooting."

"But *why?*" he repeated. "We aren't at war with anybody, so why would he consider us a hostile target?"

Before I had a chance to answer, the hard suit appeared at the edge of the light and once more took aim and fired.

Whump! The TV shook from the impact several meters to the left of us. Again, he disappeared into the relative cover the shadows provided. Tracy pushed several buttons on the sleeve of his suit.

"I'm gonna try to reach him directly." Tracy continued punching in various codes until he hit on the correct frequency.

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The Russian sounded young, younger than Jim, and we could tell immediately by his heavy breathing and the sheer panic in his voice that he was terrified.

"Who's he talking to?" I wondered aloud. "When he ran back to the crawler before it moved, I just assumed he was alone."

Jim shook his head. "He is alone, I think; he's so scared, he's talking to himself—"

"Wait, wait a second," Tracy interrupted, increasing the volume. "I think he's got back-up on the way." We listened more closely and could just make out another side to the conversation. None of us understood Russian, but it was obvious from the sound of the voice that whoever was on the other end was trying to calm him down. Unfortunately, it was just as obvious—judging by the amount of static in their signal—that whoever it was wouldn't be getting here anytime soon.

"Can you reach them?" I flashed the lights a little faster. "And get them to call this guy off?"

"I don't know." Tracy tapped the buttons on his sleeve and unconsciously cleared his throat. "We are unarmed and non-hostile, do you copy?" The suited figure slowed and immediately went quiet when Tracy spoke on his frequency, although the nervous panting continued. There was no way to tell if his back-up even heard our transmission.

"We . . . are . . . unarmed . . ." Tracy repeated slowly, deliberately.

The panting seemed to increase and the figure started moving again as he apparently came to a decision. He yelled a nonstop stream of Russian, the panicked voice crackling as the volume overdrove the hard suit's tiny speaker.

"Let's get out of here." Tracy jumped into one of the seats behind the cab, quickly drawing the safety harness around him. Following his lead, Jim buckled in quickly while I roared the TV back to life and jammed it into gear. The *Blue Stallion* jerked unsteadily as I cut it hard right. I felt the trailer pulling slightly on the damaged rear track, but the amount of drag just wasn't serious enough to worry about disconnecting it right now. I wanted to put a few hundred meters between us and the trigger-happy Russian as fast as I could. As the TV swung around, I saw him stepping out of the shadows.

Whump! Again, the TV rocked from the impact of the shell hitting several meters away. This guy may have been a shooter, but it seemed like he was being awfully careful not to hit the trailer. Of course, he didn't have a clue as to what we were carrying. For all he knew we were loaded with dynamite; which gave me an idea.

I kept the TV moving, steering with one hand while I flipped the safety cover off the trailer hatch remote. The remote switch came in handy for offloading once we'd pulled into a pressurized hangar like the one at

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Gassendi, but the safety was there for a good reason. You sure wouldn't want to remote the hatch of a pressurized trailer outside. At least, not in normal circumstances.

Whump! I jammed the button at the same time the shell hit. Almost a full second later, the TV lurched forward yet again when the trailer blew. The sudden decompression sent debris and packing crates flying everywhere within a radius of thirty meters as the TV itself—now hauling dead weight—ground to a halt, its tracks churning uselessly into the regolith. Debris of all sizes rained down around us in crazy slow motion and an occasional piece thumped onto the roof of the TV.

"Disconnect! Disconnect!" Tracy called from the back. Jim thumbed the cover off the emergency release switch on the dash and punched it several times.

"No good! Electrical's out in the trailer." I put the TV in reverse and jerked it backward as hard as I could, then forward again in an attempt to snap the hitch. Nothing. Again; hard backward, then forward. The TV shimmied side-to-side and regolith shot up past the side windows as I held the accelerator to the floor.

One of the cargo crates hit the ground just ahead of us and decompressed explosively on impact, spewing its contents—hundreds of packets of shrink-wrapped sandwiches—in a ten-meter circle all around it. As the packets hit the vacuum, they popped one-by-one, littering the surface. Crates were hitting all over now, spilling everything you could imagine—clothing, medical supplies, food, magazines, you name it. Some broke and blew their contents on impact, others remained intact.

"Here he comes," Jim muttered softly. It was obvious to the Russian, as he watched the TV spinning helplessly, that we weren't going anywhere and he took his time coming closer. We could still hear him over Tracy's suit radio; he was still breathing heavily but he no longer sounded so hysterical as he continued talking endlessly to himself. Despite the language differences, some of the words—and their intent—were clear.

"Go! Go! Go!" I yelled, coaxing every bit of power I could from the TV. The cab bounced and my feet felt like lead on the pedals as the TV lurched and strained against the derelict trailer. "Come *on,* baby!"

I could see him approach out the left window as he neared and held a position some forty meters away. As good as his previous shots had been, he wouldn't miss this time. It occurred to me that he didn't even need the explosive shells: at this distance, one hit with even a plain slug, aimed at the right spot, would tear the main track loose. He was kneeling down, drawing a careful bead. My only hope was that the cab was rocking enough to spoil the shot.

"Do it, you son of a bitch! Get it over with!"

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A crate hit the ground and ruptured halfway between us and he jumped back, off-balance, the rifle landing at his side. He scrambled for the gun as the crate blew, sending a dozen familiar-looking smaller cases flying. Even at this distance, we recognized the bright red cases immediately—soft drinks; Coca-Cola, to be precise, according to the manifest. The cases themselves began decompressing, one at a time, some above the ground, others when they hit. We couldn't believe the sight.

As each case blew, it sent twenty-four bright red plasticans flying in all directions. Then the cans themselves started blowing, one after another, almost three hundred exploding cans of Coke. And no two cans burst in quite the same way, depending on where the weakest spots in the plastic were. Some of them ruptured at one end, sending the cans rocketing out of sight behind a freezing plume of foam. Others formed tiny ruptures on both ends, transforming them into spinning propellers suspended momentarily on twin frozen swirls that looked like nothing so much as the DNA models in a biology textbook. Several exploded as they collided in mid-"air" and quickly blossomed into meters-wide popcorn shapes that froze and fell, disintegrating in a shower of sparkling crystals that evaporated into nothingness. At least one of the cans hit the windshield of the TV right in front of Jim. It exploded and expanded into a frozen staghorn shape on the glass before it was shaken free, and disappeared down in front of the cab.

But the most beautiful ones of all were the ones that exploded when they hit the ground. The cans shattered completely, sending the expanding, quick-freezing foam mushrooming into delicate, glittering corals that stood a meter or more tall before collapsing under their own weight and disappearing into the regolith.

It went on for perhaps two full minutes as we watched in amazement, mesmerized by the soundless fireworkslike display. I don't remember doing it, but I had let up on the accelerator sometime during it all, and the three of us sat in stunned silence in the TV.

Well, not exactly in silence. From the tiny speaker in Tracy's suit we could hear the heavy breathing of the Russian. He was still panting, but the sound was different now; where before the fear of battle was plain in his breathing, now he was simply out of breath. A quick look in the direction of the crawler gave us the explanation: the assault rifle lying forgotten in the dust, he was running as fast as he could back to his vehicle. We saw him dimly in the shadows as he leaped for the cab, and it took only seconds before he had the crawler swung around and was hastily putting as much distance as possible between himself and the Americanskis with their strange weapons.

"He—he thinks we're blowing up," Tracy said incredulously. "Geez, would you look at him go?"

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"Now's our chance," I said, turning to Jim. "Help Tracy finish suiting up while I run a quick diagnostic and see what kind of shape we're in." As the boy unbuckled, I looked into the back and saw that Tracy was already snapping the gloves into the sleeves of his bulky suit. "Can you cut us loose manually?"

"No problem. It'll only take a second."

"Keep monitoring our friend out there. If he even *sounds* like he's coming back, start banging on the side or something." He twisted on the helmet and as soon as the readout lights glowed within, gave us a thumbs up and headed for the lock at the rear of the TV.

I finished with the diagnostics as Jim came up and sat next to me, letting his breath out in a long, slow sigh. The TV was all right, but we both had to laugh as a red blinker announced that we had an antenna malfunction of some kind. "Must've taken a good shaking up to let it know it was in trouble. Better late than never, I suppose."

We sat quietly for several moments, scanning the horizon for any signs of movement and listening to the metallic thumping sounds from the rear of the cabin as Tracy bullied the hitch.

"What now, Rudy?"

"Well, for now we just get the hell out of here and file a full report when we get to Gassendi or when a rescue team responds to the locator, whichever occurs first. I'm not exactly sure what we stumbled onto out here—maybe a secret research station of some kind, or maybe one of their not-so-secret eavesdropping posts. Frankly, I don't really care at this point. We'll let the political people at Moonbase work it out with the Russians. Don't even try to figure it out."

There was a slight lurch forward and the TV's nose fell slightly, indicating that Tracy had managed to work the hitch loose.

The boy leaned back heavily in the co-driver's seat, relaxing for the first time since the confrontation started. "Geez," he chuckled, looking out at the littered landscape. "Have you ever seen anything like it?"

I couldn't help seeing the humor in it myself. It reminded me of a college dorm after exams. I smiled over at him and, as an afterthought, added, "By the way, you did good."

There was a noise from the back of the TV when the lock cycled and Tracy reentered. Jim and I heard a soft hiss as he twisted the helmet off his suit.

"Strap in," I said, turning the wheel hard right and pulling the TV away from the mess, "and enjoy the peace and quiet while you can. I've got a feeling the next few days are going to be busy ones." ●

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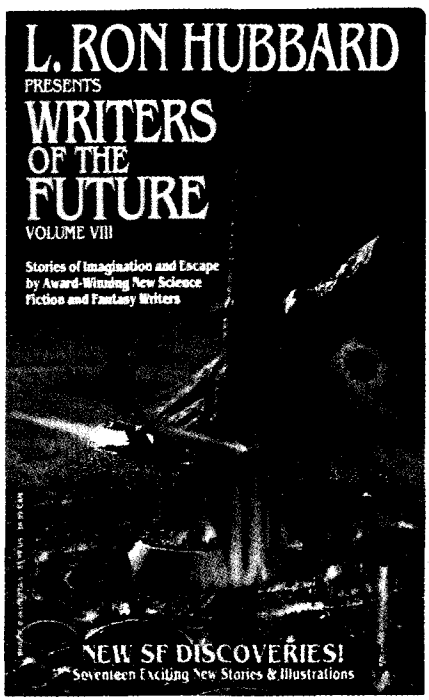
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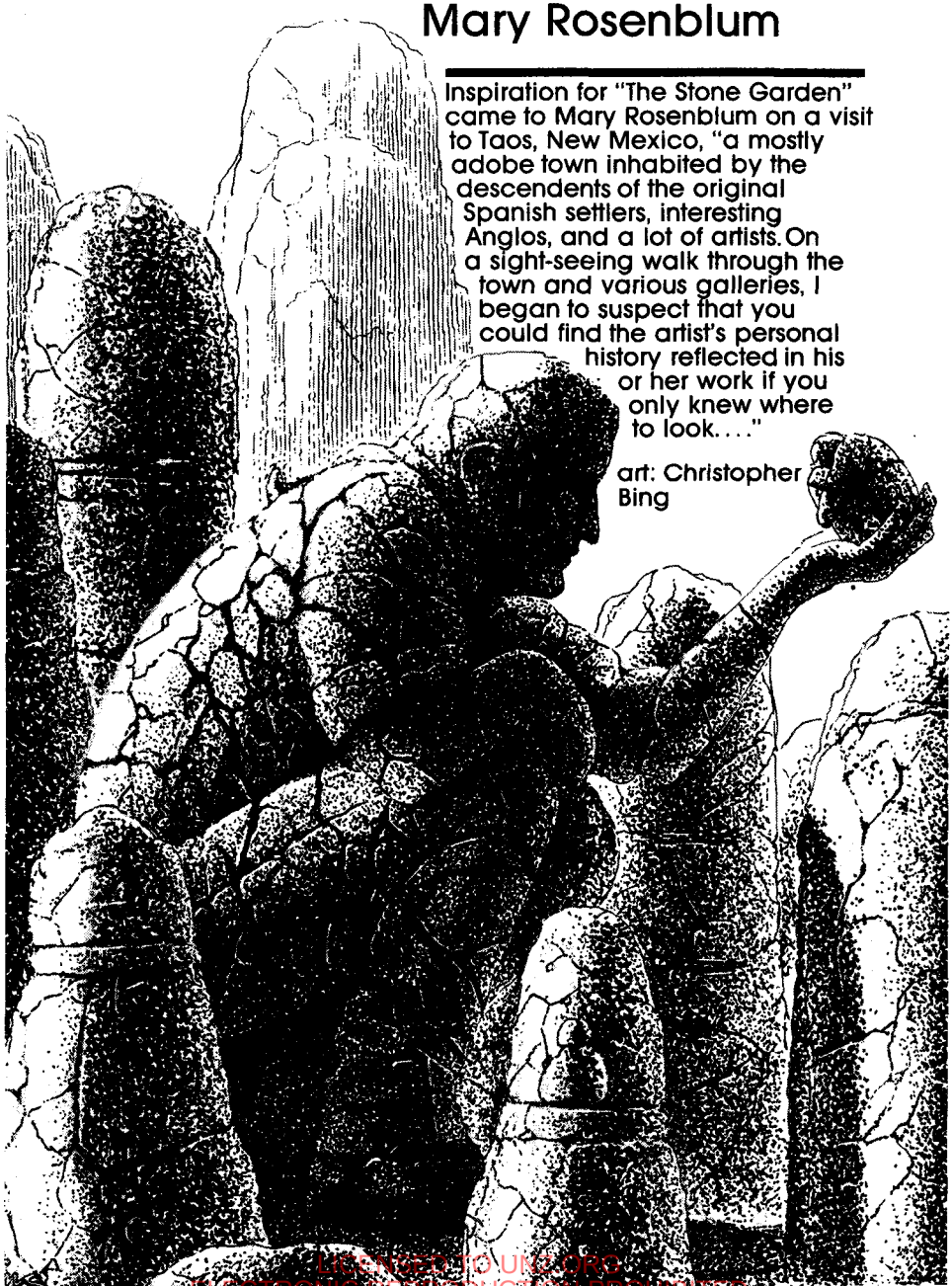
THE STONE GARDEN

Mary Rosenblum

Inspiration for "The Stone Garden" came to Mary Rosenblum on a visit to Taos, New Mexico, "a mostly adobe town inhabited by the descendents of the original Spanish settlers, interesting Anglos, and a lot of artists. On a sight-seeing walk through the town and various galleries, I began to suspect that you could find the artist's personal history reflected in his or her work if you only knew where to look. . . ."

art: Christopher Bing



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Dear Mr. Tryon. . . . The opening words of the letter ran through his head again and again, as if they had been engraved on his cortex. *You don't know me. My name is Margarita Espinoza. My mother was Xia Quejaches. You are my father.*

"Of course I could get someone else to restore the Stone." Chris was saying. Her sandals tapped an impatient rhythm on the baking Old Taos sidewalk. "I *could* call Prosper. But this isn't just *any* Major Stone, Michael. This is an Estevan."

"Prosper's very good." Michael made an effort to focus on her words. "I sculpt Stones," he said. "I don't restore them. Get Prosper." Tourists cluttered the street, decked out in expensive Southwest Chic. Their energetic enthusiasm made his head ache.

"It's because of Xia Quejaches, isn't it?" Chris caught at his arm. "Is that why you won't do it? Because it's Estevan's Stone?"

Michael stopped still, turned to face her. Chris, pale-haired, brown-eyed Anglo, gallery owner, and young enough . . . "No," he said. "It is not because of Xia, it's because you don't need a sculptor to restore the Estevan. Xia was long ago." Long ago, over and done with, this unbelievable letter aside. *Dear Mr. Tryon. . . .* "Xia was before your time," he said flatly.

Chris flushed. "I'm sorry. But I *do* need you to do this, Michael. Because you're the best. Because the Archenwald-Shen Stone is damaged. Estevan Majors are masterpieces, and Prosper is only a *technician*, damn it."

"All right, Chris." Michael sighed, shoulders drooping beneath the dry afternoon heat. "I'll at least listen to the Estevan. If I tell you that it's nothing worse than superficial distortion, you call Prosper. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Chris stood on tiptoe to kiss him lightly on the cheek. "Thanks, Michael. I appreciate it."

It was hard to say no to her, when he hadn't given her anything except Minors and mood groups lately. Majors brought the big money. Michael watched her hurry back toward the gallery. And yes, Xia *was* part of it. A little. We were a trio, you, Estevan, and I. You wrecked us, Xia. It was never the same again. And now, this letter. . . .

The tourists scuffed past him, sweating in the dry heat, staring at the smooth adobe walls of the mainstreet stores, ogling real leather vests, necklaces and belts heavy with conchos of silver and rough nuggets of real turquoise. Old Taos surrounded him—property of the Federal Historic Registry, lock, stock, and memories—regulated down to the last lizard sunning itself on the plaza stones. No hovercraft overhead, no dream parlors, no low-gee bars, no public terminals on the streets. In Old Taos, you still got a glass of water beside your plate, instead of having to order it from the menu. It was imported iceberg melt, of course,

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and you paid for it when you paid your entry fee. You paid even more for a resident's license, unless you were a Famous Artist, in which case the Registry gave you a grant to keep you as part of the local scene.

Back in the early years, back when he and Estevan and Xia had sat on the patio at the inn, drinking beer and ignoring the tourists, the water and the residency had been free. Or at least cheap. Michael's lips twitched at the fascinated horror on the face of a beautifully muscled youth. He was staring at a Victor Lopez vest woven of goathide and stone beads. Victor had an artisan's license to raise animals for leather and bone.

The kid looked Inside, expensively clothed in a natural-fiber singlet, inlays, and makeup, the son of some corporate junior exec, all set to inherit a position, assured of life with credit and private medical benefits. You *want* that vest, Michael thought, as the kid scuffed his feet. You pretend to be disgusted, but you really *want* to feel those strips of once-living skin flick against your own perfect hide. You want to savor the hint of blood and death that they will whisper to your body. You want the envious shock that the dead-goat vest will bring to the party faces of your friends.

That horrified, narcissistic lust might be just the note for Small Stone, his youngest Major. Michael paused, considered. The Small Stone was still shallow, lacking complexity. Michael didn't usually use tourists, but none of his local models had added much to Small Stone. He shrugged, touched the youth lightly on the arm, proffered his small, old-fashioned paper card to the kid's sulky stare.

"Would you be interested in modeling for me?" The kid probably didn't know a Major from a geode.

"Hey, you're one of those asteroid artists, huh? Are the rocks really alive? What does a model do, anyway?"

Slick accent. Multilingual private school, probably. "I suppose it depends on how you define life." Michael didn't let his lip curl. "You relax beside a Stone. I ask you a few questions, and the Stone absorbs some of your emotional broadcast."

"So if someone listens to it later, they'll know what I was thinking?" He looked dubious.

"No, no." Michael launched into his stock spiel. "A listener is aware of nothing more than a complex harmony—a blend of emotion and sensory input from all the models used." Unless the listener was an untrained sensitive or another sculptor. "The Minor Stones absorb only sensory perceptions. The Majors absorb emotion."

"Weird." The kid considered, fingering the expensive dermal inlays that decorated his hairless scalp. "Sure, why not?"

Anything for a thrill. "How about tomorrow afternoon? Go down Le

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Doux street." Michael pointed. "The studio is at the very end, by the perimeter fence."

Doubtful suddenly, Michael watched the kid walk away. His narrow hips swayed to the inaudible rhythms pounding through his implanted audio link. Was he right for the Small Stone after all? The slick, plugged-in tourists seemed alien and unreal, mincing down the cracked concrete to the music playing inside their skulls. Hell. Michael shrugged. Borrow the vest from Dolores—she'd give it to him after closing—let the kid play with it, wear it, and see what happened.

Doubts, doubts. Nothing had worked well recently. The resonances he had added to the Stones all sounded thin and superficial. Perhaps it was just him, out of sorts because of the dust and summer heat. Michael tossed the thin gray braid of his hair back over his shoulder. The hard-copy printout of the General Delivery letter crackled in his pocket, and he flinched.

You are my father. My mother told me last spring. She said you didn't know, that it was a long time ago. That's true. I'm twenty-two years old. . . .

Yes, a long time ago. She wasn't pregnant when she left Taos, Michael told himself. And if she was, it would have been Estevan's, anyway, not his. Go listen to the Estevan, he told himself. It would make Chris happy, and then she'd call Prosper. Do it. Do *some*thing. Michael crossed the dusty street in front of a tour bus. The driver glared, but Michael ignored him.

The man who owned the Major, a conglomerate exec named Archenwald-Shen, had leased a late-period guest house out behind the Fechin House. Michael shuffled up the dusty driveway (authentically unpaved and unstabilized). The best of the best hung in the Fechin House Museum; old masterworks in oil and acrylic, kinetic sculpture, scent compositions, and even one of his own Majors. Mr. Archenwald-Shen must be impressively connected to have obtained the lease to the guest house. Mere credit wouldn't suffice. The dappled cool of the real-grass lawn behind the main house welcomed him. Michael wiped dusty sweat from his face. It had been cooler in the old days. Perhaps the Registry would give in and cover Old Taos with a dome one of these days.

"Mr. Tryon?" A scrawny man with caucasian features and afro-dark skin popped his head out of the studio door. "I'm honored." He beamed. "A good restorer can do a *marvelous* job with a Major."

Michael walked past the man's gloating eyes. Party meat. That's what his visit would mean; points made against some petty rival. *Ah, yes, my dear. We had Michael Tryon out to touch up the Estevan Major. . . .* Why did I let Chris talk me into this? Because she had buyers who wanted Tryon Majors, but she didn't nag him very often? Michael glowered at

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the little exec. His jowly face seemed too large for his soft, skinny body. *Power*, his face and flab proclaimed. *I'm so Inside that I don't* have *to be pretty*.

"If you'll show me the Stone?" Michael snapped.

"Right this way." The small man gestured with self-conscious importance. "I met Mr. Estevan years ago," he said. "Wonderful fellow. He asked me to sit for one of the Stones. A Major. Marvelous experience."

You need a few sour notes in any Major, Michael didn't say. Instead, he smiled marginally, followed Mr. Archenwald-Shen through the small, low-ceilinged adobe rooms that Mr. Archenwald-Shen would probably think unfit for a pet if the guest house wasn't on the Registry's list of historic homes.

"I'm thinking of purchasing a Major for my office on Pan-Euro Orbital," the exec said casually. "I find them stimulating and relaxing. One of *yours*, perhaps." He glanced slyly at Michael as he ushered him into what had been decorated as the living room.

Michael made a noncommital noise, his eyes on the smooth contours of the Stone that stood in one carefully lighted corner. It dominated the room, caressing Michael instantly with a symphony of contemplative peace. He sighed, experiencing the weary pleasure of twilight spent resting on a rock bench, graced with the high, clear energy of young eyes watching morning sunlight.

The Tree Stone. He recognized it instantly.

Michael closed his eyes, Estevan's folded weathered face vivid against the screen of his eyelids. If he reached out this minute, his hands would find the familiar, down-curving shoulders and he would hear Estevan's soft chuckle as Michael kissed him on both cheeks. *Such passion, M'kile. You make me feel old.* But you weren't old, Estevan. You weren't much older than me. Such a stupid waste, to die in a mag-lev accident.

Michael opened his eyes, feeling for the distortion that the little exec had complained about. Ah . . . he winced at a shrill echo of pain, anger, or perhaps fear. The psychic grime disturbed the perfect harmony of the Stone, rasped against mental nerve-endings like fork-tines across a china plate. Michael laid his hand on top of the mottled gray curve of the Stone's surface. It felt dense, *alive*, not dead rock at all. Petrified flesh, Michael remembered. That's what I thought, the first time I ever touched a Stone—an alien, Medusa-frozen soul, set adrift in the void.

"Is it all right?" Archenwald-Shen cleared his throat. "When we bought it, the agent assured us that they wouldn't distort on display."

He was poised for righteous anger, waiting for Michael's cue. "They don't distort seriously if they're not wakened by a sculptor. Casual contact doesn't have much effect, although repeated strong emotions in close proximity *can* absorb to some degree." Michael felt rather than saw the

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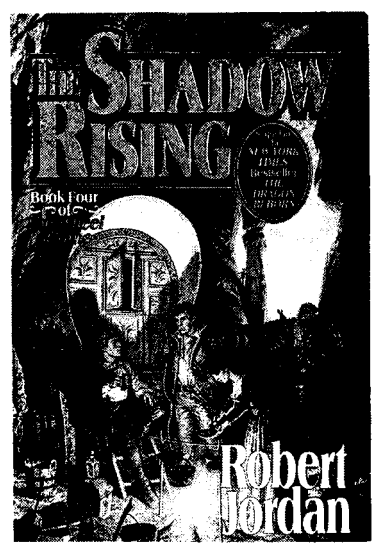

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exec's small flinch. Aha! "Please leave the room while I evaluate the Stone. Keep everyone else away, too."

The little man flushed at Michael's tone, his Adam's apple twitching with his swallowed anger. "How long will it take?" he asked in a tightly controlled voice.

"I don't know. If you'll excuse me?"

The exec's stiff-legged exit broadcast stifled affront: Is the cocktail party retelling worth this insolence?

Michael snapped mental fingers, banishing the pompous little ass from his mind. Calm. He closed his eyes, breathed once, in-and-out slow, focusing on the Stone as he passed his hands gently across its fine, dense grain. Estevan had spent twenty years creating Tree Stone, blending perfect moments of human emotion to create a symphony of humanity. Michael himself had leaned against the awakened Stone for Estevan one sunny afternoon, letting it absorb his drowsy lethargy after a passionate noon of lovemaking with Xia.

You don't know me, but Xia Quejaches was my mother . . .

Wisps of blue-green and amber seemed to swirl, coalesce, and dissolve on the Stone's surface. The room faded around him as Michael opened himself to the Stone's harmonies. He caught a glimpse of an hispanic face, a boy, shadow-eyed and sad, felt the cool touch of lotion on sunburned skin, caught a whiff of horse manure drifting on hot afternoon air, felt a twinge of bittersweet pain: *Do I have to throw things, Estevan?* a voice whispered. *Do I have to kill him, to make him realize how much I love him?*

"Xia?" Michael's eyes snapped open, but her voice was gone, drowned by the screech of discord that he had noticed earlier.

Distant shouting echoed in his head, barbed with violence. Michael gritted his teeth, picking out the individual notes of harsh dissonance. An ordinary listener would feel only the fingernail scrape of discord. *He* was a sculptor. Michael winced at the blaring notes. Pain. Anger. For an instant, a face took shape in Michael's vision, male and mostly Asian, with exquisitely molded cheekbones and grass green eyes. This was Old Taos, and Michael knew Archenwald-Shen's lover when he saw him, had heard the rumors about their fights.

That bastard. Michael lifted his hands from the Stone's warm surface, breathing too fast, sweaty and light-headed with anger. Slowly the Stone's resonances faded to a subtle whisper again.

As Michael left the house, the little exec scurried down the dusty driveway after him. "Well?" he panted, his composure lost in the hot glare. "Is it all right?"

Did he know anything about Stones except their price? "The Stone has been damaged," Michael said between clenched teeth. Beat your lover

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somewhere else, he wanted to snarl at the ugly little man. "I'll have to adjust the resonances. I'll be coming in and out with models." Xia had modeled for that Stone. *Do I have to throw things, Estevan?*

"You mean *here?* What kind of models? Security will have to run a check on them first, and we're giving a dinner party next Thursday. Will you be finished by then?"

"I have no idea." Michael turned his back on the man, stalked down the drive beneath Security's invisible stare.

Do I have to throw things?

Xia's whisper pursued him. The letter might have been a spell, conjuring her ghost from the depths of Estevan's stone. Michael shoved his hand into his pocket, savagely crumpling the hardcopy. The air smelled of dust and no rain. It always smelled of dust this time of year. The Registry wouldn't have it any other way.

Chris tracked him down later in his corner booth at the Taos Inn. She twisted her way between the crowded tables, her short-cropped hair shining in the dim light like a stray shaft of afternoon sunlight. Two beer bottles and a single glass clinked in her hand.

"Thank you. For going to see the Estevan." She plunked the dewy bottles down on the table and slid onto the bench across from him.

"*De nada.*" Michael picked up one of the bottles.

The adobe walls of the inn, sun-baked mud flecked with golden straw, held in a faint echo of the morning cool. No air conditioning for the inn. It was so much like it had always been that he felt as if Xia could be out on the patio, silver earrings gleaming against her dusky skin and the dark curtain of her hair, laughing at one of Estevan's sly jokes.

Michael twisted off the plastic cap, waited while creamy foam rose up the neck and subsided. "I take it that Archenwald-Shen called." He tilted the bottle, swallowed deeply. "How did *he* end up with Tree Stone?"

"He paid for it. What's with *you?*" Chris eyed the already-empty bottles, poured amber and foam down the side of her tilted glass. "He wants to buy one of your Majors, by the way."

"So he told me."

"You're in a mood today." She made her voice light. "That Minor you brought over is wonderful. If I close my eyes, I'm sitting in the sun, on the bank of the Hondo. The brewing thunderstorm is a masterstroke, Michael. You keep getting better. I can't wait for the next Major."

"Meaning how soon will I have one ready?"

"Well . . . yes. Buyers are not patient people. How's the Sun Stone coming? You said it was getting close."

"It's coming." He'd been saying *close* for a year now, and they both knew it.

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Michael watched Chris tilt her head so that her white-blonde hair fell down over one eye. She reminded him of Xia when she did that, the negative of Xia's coloring; silver hair and ivory skin, all shop-bought of course. Xia's darkness had been natural. Guatemalan, Lacandon Maya, she had told him. LA barrio, more likely. It was their eyes that were alike, he decided; brown and depthless, like summer pools in the Hondo. "Sun Stone might be ready next month." Chris's Xia-eyes dragged the words out of him.

"That soon? That's wonderful."

"I said it *might* be ready." Michael drained the last of his beer, signaled for another. "I'm not satisfied with Sun Stone's upper-end grace notes."

She said you didn't know, that it was a long time ago. . . .

Was Xia still alive, then? He had come to assume that she was dead, like Estevan. If she *was* alive, she would be getting old. He couldn't imagine Xia aging, and wondered if she had purchased a second chance at "youth" from the body-shops. He pulled the crumpled letter out of his pocket, tossed it onto the table.

Chris picked it up, smoothed it out and read it, eyebrows arching slowly. "I can't . . ." She took a deep breath. "Could it . . . be true?"

"No." Michael looked away. "She's Estevan's," he said. "Or someone else's." Margarita Espinoza. A father's name?

"She's rather abrupt." Chris laid the crumpled letter on the table. "Staying at the Albuquerque Hilton until Sunday, huh? Are you going to go see her? It might be a scam, Michael. I bet she didn't bring along her DNA profile."

Chris sounded angry. Michael frowned. "I can't work for a week after I've been in the city." The city had *eaten* Estevan, chewed him up in its metal and plastic jaws. "I'll call her and tell her she's mistaken." He folded the flimsy sheet of hardcopy. Why *now?* Why this, after all these years of silence? What do you want from me, Xia? Are you alive? Are you a ghost, sending this child to haunt me?

"I'm sorry." Chris's hand closed on his. "I'm sorry this came down on you out of the blue. Let me know if I can do anything, okay?" She slid out of the bench. "I have to get back to the gallery. Aretha is a willing assistant, but she still can't tell one Barkenson from another."

Who *can?* Michael thought irritably. The damn lightshows all looked alike. "I'll work on Sun Stone," he said, without enthusiasm.

"Great. I'm holding my breath." She touched his cheek lightly and hurried away.

Michael felt a twinge of guilt as he left the inn. Chris's gallery wasn't doing well, no matter that she worked like a dog. It wasn't entirely her fault, although she had made one or two bad bets on local talent. The people who had the money for art seemed to be getting more and more

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conservative as the years went by, less willing to risk money on new names. And Chris was young. Truly young, not shop young—young as Xia had been when she had first arrived in town, a performance artist working with a mixed-media troupe.

Nearly as young as Margarita Espinoza.

Michael passed the last of the adobe shops, turned down the cracked asphalt path that led to his studio. The squat adobe building stood a scant five meters from the chain-link and razor-wire perimeter fence. The red and black seal of the Federal Historic Registry glared out at the dry hills and the waterless *acequia* that had been hand-dug centuries ago. No entry here. Not to the present. Walk around to the gate, surrender your video equipment, pay your fee, and you too can visit Old Taos.

"I live in an egg," Michael said out loud. "Full of the yolk of the past." A thousand-year-old egg buried in the manure heap of the present? Two magpies lifted from the shade of the old cottonwood that shaded his tiny adobe studio, flapped heavily into the branches. "This fence is the shell," he told them, but they preened without answering, not interested in shell or egg unless it cracked and stank in the sun.

This petrified egg had hatched a cuckoo's chick, Xia's anguished whisper from the past. When had she wept those words to Estevan's Stone? When?

I *am* in a mood. Michael had started for the studio, intending to tidy up and think about the resonances needed to heal the damaged Tree Stone. Instead, he veered toward the back of the studio and his Stone garden. Sun and cottonwood shade dappled the rocks and wiry grass of the garden. The Minors were grouped off by themselves, in singles or chords of contrasting moods, small and silver gray in the hot sun. The Majors stood apart, shadows of Stonehenge, dreams of Easter Island, individuals. They aged and matured as the sun wheeled overhead, absorbing the hopes and dreams and fears Michael wove into them, note by human note.

Michael sighed as the Stones' subtle harmonies enveloped him. He spent hours here, listening to the unawakened Stones, letting their sensual and emotional resonances suggest new themes and counterpoints. Michael dropped his tattered cushion in front of Sun Stone and knelt slowly, wincing at the stiffness in his knees, his inner turmoil dissolving in the soft murmur of the Stones. Gently he stroked Sun Stone's smooth surface, felt the Stone's ripple of response.

Not everyone can be a sculptor—it takes more than a pat to wake a Stone, to weave the themes of love and summer heat into the Stone's musing song. The woof comes from the model, Estevan used to say. The warp is strung from the sculptor's soul. Michael closed his eyes, remembering his excitement the first time he had waked a Minor under his

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teacher's critical eye. He had come to Old Taos on a Registry grant, a rising star in the hot new art of Stone sculpture. He had found Estevan drinking beer in the Taos Inn, an empty chair across from him as if he had been waiting for Michael to show up.

Our Stones aren't alike at all. Michael leaned his forehead against the Stone, alien chunk of asteroid, Medusa-soul thirsty for lust/anger/love. *Tempestuous*, the critics had said of Michael's early Stones. *Impassioned.* When they talked about Estevan's Majors, they spoke of balance and focus.

Balance. He and Estevan had struck a delicate balance, not quite lovers, more than friends; a blend of love and friendship and rivalry. Then Xia had come along with her river-pool eyes and her midnight hair. At first, the balance had shifted to triad, even though she had been only Michael's lover. The echoes of that time ran through the murmur of the Stones, bright as a vein of gold in the hot, still air. Their muted chords swept him away, rumble of thunder, the sweet scratch of fingernails on love-heated skin, the scent of rain on dust and freshly washed hair. I remember. . . .

The pain in his knees and the glare of sunlight in his eyes finally roused him. Dozing? Michael got stiffly to his feet. Dreaming of Xia? The beginnings of a headache pulsed at the base of his skull and Michael blinked as the last beams of the setting sun dazzled his eyes. Ah, Xia. The storms had come eventually, and finally, the winter-afternoon finality of the empty studio, the bed neatly made, the absence of her clothes and possessions a shout in the cold twilight.

I never suspected. He winced as a rock rolled beneath his foot and pain twinged up his leg. Here, in Old Taos, I should have heard. It had hurt, when he found out where she had gone. The news had stunned him. *That* news had reached him less than an hour after she had walked through Estevan's door. I never guessed, you bastard. Which had hurt more? Xia's betrayal or Estevan's? I never guessed that you and Xia . . . "You're not *my* daughter," he said aloud. "You can't be."

Next morning, Michael went looking for Cecelia Lujan, one of his regular models. He found her in the state-goods store, pricing melons that she couldn't possibly afford on her Registry salary and grieving gently.

"Carl again?" he asked her as he fingered the drip-irrigated melons.

"We had a fight and he didn't come home after the Rodeo dance last night."

Carl worked for State Water, pulled extra money as a Registry "local" after hours. He mingled with the tourists, dressed in jeans, shirt, and real-leather boots, his implants and tattoos disguised with makeup.

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"I'd forgotten that this was Rodeo weekend." Michael sniffed the netted rind of a cantaloupe, tucked it carefully into his wire cart.

"I wish *I* could forget. The town's bulging at the seams and I'm putting in double overtime at the Hotel and the Inn." Cecelia worked full time for the Registry, Pueblo in face, mostly Basque and Chicano in ancestry. "I don't know when I'm going to have time for Carl and he's going to think I'm pissed, just because he went home with Maria." She pushed black hair back from her broad face, not angry at Carl, just sad at the inevitable misunderstanding.

Cecelia was the most forgiving woman Michael had ever known, and not out of fear or need. She got angry honestly, could punch you flat while in a rage, but she forgave honestly. Michael put his arm around her, catching a whiff of sweat and woman-smell. "Do you have time for a modeling job? It shouldn't take more than an hour. I'll add a bribe to the regular rate," he said as she started to shake her head and picked the cantaloupe out of his basket.

Cecelia laughed. "I'll take it. Carl loves cants—but I've got to be over at the inn by ten."

"No problem." Michael unloaded his scant groceries—and the melon—onto the checkout conveyor, ran his card through the slot in the register. Not even the Registry could force the state-goods store to go back to human checkers and cash. Cecelia was waiting for him at the exit, his plastic bag of groceries in one hand, the melon in the other.

"When are you going to let Chris into bed?" she asked on the way across the small parking lot. "It must be tough on her, having the kid show up like that. Xia's daughter."

"My dear!" Michael almost dropped his groceries.

"Oh, stop." Cecelia tossed her head. "This is Old Taos, remember? The letter showed up in the PO's general delivery file. What do you expect?"

What indeed? "I don't know anything about this ridiculous letter." Michael felt lightheaded. "As for Chris, it has nothing to do with her at all. My God. She's young enough to be my *daughter.*" He winced.

"What does *that* matter?" Cecelia's dark eyes glinted. "You don't look up from your rocks too often, do you?"

Michael shifted the grocery bag to his other hand. "If you have to be at the inn by ten, we'd better hurry," he said.

Mercifully, the Archenwald-Shen house seemed deserted—except for the intangible shadow of Security. Michael left his groceries and Cecelia's melon bribe in the thoroughly modernized kitchenette, feeling sweaty and too tired from their short walk.

Old, I am getting old, in spite of the body-shop. His first Major had

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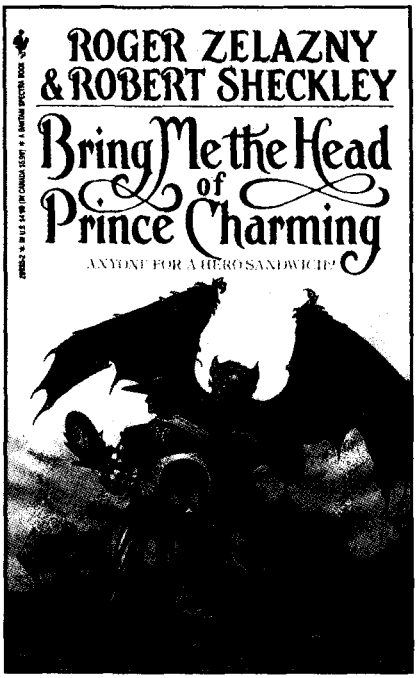

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matured more than twenty-five years ago. Three years before Margarita Espinoza had been born.

Cecelia had already settled herself against Tree Stone. She had modeled for him many times, a reliable source of warmth and sex. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the Stone's cool bulk, her respiration slowing, deepening. Michael didn't have to put her in a trance any more. The hot young sculptors used drugs on their models, never mind that the chemical fuzz blurred the final resonance. Or worse, they used recorded models. For speed. So that they could produce a mature Major in five years instead of twenty or thirty.

Factories. Michael suppressed the flash of his disdain, focused on Tree Stone's murmuring song. The touch of his hand brought the Stone to wakefulness. Michael shivered with the familiar rush of his heightened awareness. The scientists talked about synchronized wave-patterns and alpha-state harmonics. Awake, a Stone became part of you, alien-asteroid lover, drinker of dreams. Michael closed his eyes, intensely aware of Cecelia, of her fatigue, the small ache of her full bladder, the low murmur of her emotions.

"Tell me about Carl," he whispered. "He was a shit, last night. You yelled at each other."

"He was a real bastard, picking a fight because there wasn't any food in the house, when we'd both put in a twenty hour day already. He was just horny for Maria, could have said so, but he had to do it his macho way, you know."

She was a little apologetic, because she had undoubtedly participated wholeheartedly in the screaming heat of the fight, wasn't angry anymore, was amused/exasperated at Carl's games, forgiving, ready to heal the break . . .

Just what Tree Stone needed.

". . . I mean, he's such a *kid* sometimes. You know, all pissed off and yelling at me, when he's really mad at himself because he's feeling guilty about wanting Maria. You know the temper I got. . . ."

The warp is strung from the sculptor's soul, Estevan had said. Tree Stone drank it in, the love beneath the fighting, Michael's awareness of that love as the solid base that had kept Carl and Cecelia together in this tight little microcosm of a town for twelve years now, no matter whose bed they had spent time in. . . .

It *was* what the Stone needed. Michael felt the dissonances canceling out, jagged edges smoothing into harmony. Carl's face filled his mind, too-young and grinning, Cecelia's image of her lover. Michael let it soak into the Stone. Not too strong, now. . . . He lifted his palm, felt the electric buzz of separation, felt the Stone sink back into slumber. "Thanks, Cecelia," he said softly.

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"That's it?" She shook back her hair, got to her feet and yawned. "Let me know when you need me again. And thanks for the melon."

Michael listened to the fading sound of her steps, heard the front door close. Tired by the contact, drowsing, he let the Stone's resonances lift him on a gentle swell of sense and emotion, a slow tidal rhythm of life. Half-seen glimpses of faces, sagebrush, chamisa, and piñon pine flitted through his brain, redolent with gentle memory. He saw a shallow summer river, watercress among the rocks. The Hondo. They'd picnicked there often, he and Xia. She'd found the polished skull of a goat there one afternoon. Neanderthal goat, she'd callled it, had hung it on the wall of the studio. It still hung there, smooth and yellowed as old ivory.

With a guilty twitch, Michael realized that he was searching for Xia in Tree Stone, was sifting through resonances like you might sift through a lapful of autumn leaves, searching for that one bit of perfect gold. You didn't *do* this. Never. Feeling like a voyeur, a peeping tom peering through the windows of Estevan's creativity, he started to get up.

Xia was suddenly *there*, a whisper of presence that made him shiver with the need to reach out and touch her. Feet gathered awkwardly beneath him, Michael crouched, frozen still.

No matter what I do, he shuts me out, Estevan, hides himself in his damned Stones. Do I have to throw things? Do I have to kill him to make him realize how much I love him?

"That's not how it was!" Startled by the sound of his own voice, Michael toppled over, banging his knee painfully on the tiled floor. That wasn't it *at all*. She had been bitter and bitchy, because her career as a media-dancer was floundering and his star had been rising. She had demanded all of his attention, had been spiteful when he had worked on the Stones, hurting him with barbed words, driving him away.

Kneeling on the floor, Michael tried to find her again, but her voice stayed lost, the single note of a moment vanished in a symphony of decades. Shamelessly, Michael hunted through the resonances, found a moment of rich pain when Estevan said *Yes, yes, you can stay here, but it's going to hurt M'Kile and it will solve nothing. Why must the two of you tear me between you?*

No. Estevan had betrayed him, had betrayed their friendship. Michael fled the studio, running down the graveled drive, the years flying about his head like dry leaves. He grasped at them but they kept slipping between his fingers. He *stole* her from me. She *betrayed* me. He had turned his back on them, poured his hurt and rage into the Stones. *Impassioned* the critics had raved. *Tempestuous.*

Xia had left Estevan after a single month, had left Taos. Eventually, he and Estevan had been friends again—not the same as before, but not enemies anymore, anyway. Estevan had tried to talk about Xia, but had

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given up after awhile. If Xia had called him, talked to him, he had never said.

Hurt. Michael had felt hurt in the Stone's Xia. He had felt Estevan's grief for their broken friendship.

No, no, their doing, *their* wrong. Not *mine*. I *remember*.

The Stones remembered, Medusa-flesh of frozen souls.

Michael was panting by the time he reached his studio, breathing the hot, dusty air in great, searing gasps. Sweat ran down his face, stuck wisps of hair to his neck. Heat hung in the dusty shadow beneath the cottonwood, and the Stones baked silently in his garden. He paused by Small Stone, felt its shallow youth. It was his latest. He had begun it how long ago? Eight years?

"Hey." A figure emerged from the cottonwood's shadow. "I was just about to take off."

Michael stared blankly at the youth walking toward him.

"Remember?" Sunlight glinted on his scalp inlays. "You asked me to come by and be a model for one of these." He jerked his head at the Stones.

"Oh. Yes," Michael said thickly.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." Michael turned away from the kid's shop-perfect face, laid his palms on Sun Stone. It felt warm beneath his hands, fever hot, and its resonances soaked into him; sting of sweat-salt on lips, ache of wrists tired from weeding. Xia's garden. Xia's young muscles. He remembered those notes, remembered the afternoon he had wakened Sun Stone to drink her gentle weariness. . . .

Sun Stone remembered.

I loved you, Xia. I loved you more than I've ever loved anything. I never hurt you. Never. Why couldn't he find those resonances in the Stone?

"What do *you* guys get out of these?" The youth peered into Michael's face. "I mean, you're the ones who do this stuff. What's it like for you right now?"

What is it like for me? Michael laughed, a single, cracked note. Sun Stone rocked gently beneath his palms, just beginning to waken. Michael took his hands away quickly, heard feet crunch in gravel.

Archenwald-Shen was walking up the drive.

"Is this a bad time? Am I interrupting?" The little exec arched his eyebrows at the tourist kid, the absence of a smirk on his face a statement in itself. "Ms. Neiman couldn't reach you on your terminal, so I thought I'd drop around. I hope you don't mind." His tone made it a rhetorical question.

"What do you want?" Michael said.

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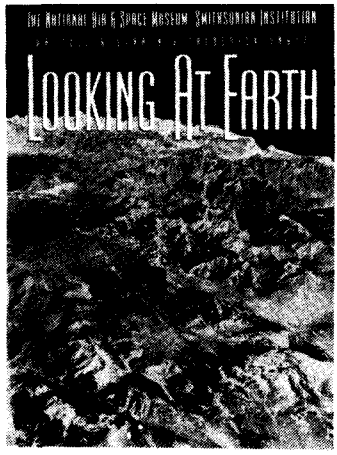

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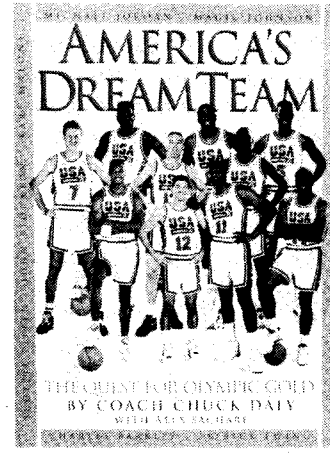

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"I want to buy one of your Majors. For my office." He looked around the garden, his eyes glittering, hungry. "She said that you might be finished with one soon. I'm willing to pay for it in advance."

Sun Stone was finished. Sun Stone hadn't changed appreciably in years. "I'm sorry." The words sounded harsh as the croak of a magpie. "I don't take advance payment. I have no Majors to sell."

The little exec's eyes were cold, but he smiled. "I'm sorry to hear that. It's been what . . . six years since your last Major was unveiled?"

That long? Michael rubbed a hand across his face, feeling sweat and dust on his skin. "Majors take time," he said.

"Danners's latest was a sensation up on New Chicago. He works in a subsea dome. I understand that he gets some marvelous resonances from dead corals. His latest Major was only seven years old."

Suave tone, claws hidden beneath velvet gloves. Michael showed his teeth to the executive. "Danners uses recordings. He's in a rush."

"The critics loved him. A strong new voice, they called him, if I remember correctly. A sculptor for our time."

"I'm sorry." Trapped between the tourist kid's shallow venality and this ugly man's self-confident hunger, Michael struggled for calm. "I'm . . . in the middle of something. You'll have to leave." There was no power behind his anger, only fear.

Archenwald-Shen heard it and smiled gently. "I'll leave you to your work. I'm sorry that I'll have to settle for a Danners." He bowed and walked down the driveway, still smiling, as if he had won a contest. Perhaps he had. Michael turned away, his skin feeling stiff beneath his sweaty clothes, brittle as sun-baked plastic. "I can't work this afternoon." He didn't look at the kid, didn't want to see the surmise on his face.

I have finished Sun Stone.

"You want me to come back?"

"No, no." Michael waved his hands, wordless. Small Stone wasn't just young, Small Stone was . . . dull. Flat. "I don't need you," he said. Just go, get out of here, leave me alone. . . . *The warp is strung from the sculptor's soul.*

Can a sculptor run out of soul, Estevan?

The Stones drowsed, filling the hot air with echos of their lives together, his and Xia's and Estevan's, notes of laughter, weary talk in the cool morning darkness, whispered moments of love and friendship. Fragments of the past drifted on the air like scraps of torn paper. Michael could feel Old Taos drowsing, frozen to unchanging Medusa stone by the Registry, a Brigadoon bit of the past. Michael shuddered, hearing Xia's sigh in the music of the Stones. She is real, he thought. Here, in this garden, at this moment, Xia—young media-dancer, lover Xia—was more

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real than the daughter who waited for him to call her in an Albuquerque hotel.

You are my father.

Stumbling a little on the sunbaked dirt, Michael went back to his studio. The goat skull gleamed on the wall above his couch. Neanderthal goat. Michael blinked, his eyes adjusting slowly after the hot glare of sunlight. Hands trembling a little, he touched his terminal's screen, watched it shimmer to life. She couldn't be his, but he owed her this much; ghost-child from a past that wasn't his.

"Albuquerque Hilton." A woman's too-perfect face appeared on the screen, eyes shining with the desire to help him.

A video construct. "I . . . was trying to reach Ms. Margarita Espinoza. I don't know her room number." Michael's voice cracked and sweat prickled in his armpits. In a moment her face would appear on the screen; Margarita Espinoza. What would he see? Traces of Xia? Of Estevan?

He would have to ask her. About Xia.

"I'm sorry." The woman's perfect face reflected genuine sorrow. "Ms. Espinoza checked out very early this morning. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Checked out? Michael felt his blood settle coldly into his stomach. *I will be staying at the Albuquerque Hilton until Sunday. In case you wish to contact me.* This was only Saturday afternoon.

"Sir? Is there anything else that I can do for you?"

"Do you have her address?" Michael croaked. "A personal code?"

"I'm sorry, sir. We cannot divulge that information."

"This is an emergency."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Damn you . . ."

The construct vanished and Michael slammed his fist against the screen. Gone? How could she *do* that, just *leave?* How *could* she? I don't even know where the hell she lives, he raged. I don't know if Xia's alive. I don't know anything.

I don't even know if she's my daughter.

He leaned against the terminal, breathing fast. Xia had stayed with Estevan for only a month before she had left Taos. Had she been pregnant on that winter afternoon?

I am afraid. Why am I afraid of this ghost-child?

Michael turned his back on the terminal, moved randomly around the studio, washing his breakfast dishes, dusting. His hands fumbled, dropping a glass, knocking a book from the shelf. He felt numb, as if the nerve endings in his skin had suddenly died. She's gone. Michael bent to retrieve the fallen book. Forget her. The words of the title had become meaningless spatters of ink. He replaced it carefully. The goat skull

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hung on the wall above the shelf. Neanderthal goat. He had used the resonances of that picnic afternoon in Sun Stone. It was out there in the garden, sun and love and the smooth, old ivory feel of bone beneath Xia's fingers. Waiting for him, waiting. . . .

His hands trembled as he took the skull from its nail.

"Michael?" Chris looked up from her desk with a start. "I was just leaving a message on your terminal. You should have told me that you were sending Sun Stone in. I just about fell over when they carried it in. I didn't even have a place for it."

"It was a . . . sudden decision." Michael didn't look at her, couldn't tear his eyes from Sun Stone. She had set it in front of a bone-white flat, lighted it artfully. "Winter Stone, Dark Stone, and Dawn Stone are ready, too," he said heavily.

"Michael?" Chris came around from behind her desk, worry spiking her tone. "Are you sure? I mean . . . I thought they weren't finished yet."

"They've been finished for years."

"I didn't send Archenwald-Shen out to your studio." Chris laid a hand on his arm. "Please believe me. I was furious when he told me and I let him know it. Which means he'll probably start dealing with Crichlow's gallery, but what the hell. I'm so sorry he bothered you. . . ." Her eyes strayed to the door, focused on the carryall he had left there. "God damn it." Her face went pale. "Xia walked out of your life more than twenty years ago! You don't *know* that this Margarita is your daughter. She didn't send you any DNA analysis. You don't know, but you're still going to go running off on some goddamn wild goose chase! Michael, this is *stupid*."

Michael blinked at her, shocked by the tears in Chris's eyes. Cecelia told me, he thought numbly. "It's not just Xia or Margarita Espinoza," he said. "It's me." Old Taos was an egg, but a perfect and impenetrable one. It would never hatch into an ugly duckling, or a vulture, or a peacock. It would never hatch at all. "I've been here too long." He touched Chris's face, aching for the pain in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She slapped his hand away. "You don't have anything to be sorry about. Do you think you're going to find your lover of twenty years ago? Do you think she's going to be the *same woman*, that you're going to just move in, pick up where you left off and live in some wonderful never-never land?"

Michael shook his head, the words he needed to say to her balling up in his throat.

"Michael, don't go." Chris clutched his hand, her eyes on his face, brown as a summer pool in the Hondo. "Your Minors are the best, you know. The very best."

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The domed cities terrified him. Their implanted and tattooed crowds, wired-in and inaccessible, choked him, drowned him in silence and noise. They would eat him too, like they'd eaten Estevan. Michael shivered, walked over to lay his hand on Sun Stone. The dry heat of sunset enfolded him, spicy with piñon and the promise of twilight cool. She was right about the Minors. I could stay here, he thought. Chris would love him, if he let her; maybe she loved him already.

I love you, Xia whispered in Sun Stone's song.

Only the Stones truly remember. Who was the Michael Tryon that *Xia* remembered? *Do I have to throw things. . . ?*

"I've walled myself in with my own past," he said. "Now, I'm afraid to let go." *He* was the egg, a shriveled yolk inside a safe shell. It took Danners only seven years to complete a Stone. The critics loved him. "Small Stone needs more work," Michael said and heard the fear in his voice.

Chris heard it, too. "But not yet?" she asked.

"Not yet." Maybe not ever. Maybe he would crumble to dust outside the gate, like a mummy when its air-tight sarcophagus is opened. Maybe it was too late. "My . . . daughter ran away from me," he said. Was she afraid? Afraid that he wouldn't call, or afraid that he *would? I* am afraid. Michael slung the carryall over his shoulder, felt the lumpy prod of the goat skull through the slick fabric. Who are you, Xia, twenty years older? Who have you loved? You terrify me, Xia. You threw a daughter at me and the shell cracked. You let in the present.

"Good luck," Chris said softly.

Margarita Espinoza had run away. Well, you could find anyone, if you looked hard enough, even yourself. Michael straightened his shoulders, took his carryall and his fear out into the dusty, timeless egg that was Old Taos.

If he hurried, he could catch the three o'clock shuttle to Albuquerque. ●

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WRESTLING WITH THE DEMON

Steve Carper

Steve Carper is the author of two nonfiction books, and his first anthology, *The Defective Detective: Mystery Parodies by the Great Humorists*, should be out soon. A graduate of Clarion West, Mr. Carper has sold stories to *Galaxy* and to *Pulphouse*. "Wrestling with the Demon" is his first tale for *Asimov's*.

In 1782, John Goodricke of York, England, started a series of observations which would lead him to the discovery of the first known eclipsing binary star, a milestone in the understanding of star behaviors. He was eighteen years old. A disease in infancy had left him profoundly deaf.

This night I looked at Beta Persei and was much amazed to find its brightness altered, two magnitudes dimmer than ever seen before. Beta Persei is the star known as Algol, familiar, as the name implies, to the astronomers of Islam who referred to it as R'as al Ghul, the Demon's Head. Al Ghul and thus, Algol. Demon. Well named. It is the very opposite of a nova, this sudden lessening, this diminishing of one's very being, or essence, and evidence indubitable that unanticipated disaster may strike even the heavenly spheres. For all the good and noble souls here on Earth, who is it that may minister to a star?

At the age of eight I was sent across the North Sea from my father's consular post in Groningen, Holland, to Thomas Braidwood's academy in Edinburgh. Such a long, lonely voyage that was, seeming not a mile less distant than that traveled by the light of far-off Algol, nor any less cold and forlorn. Once there, to my amazement, Mr. Braidwood took a rod of silver, but a few inches long, flatted at one end, with a ball as large as a marble at the other, and gently placed my tongue in the positions which form vowels and syllables and speech. Language surrounded me in every form, and though my progress was slow, one day I realized that the marks I read on paper and the signs made by my fingers and these vibrations issued from my mouth were one and the same, just

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as that ancient Roman genius reasoned that Vesper the Evening Star was no different from Lucifer the Morning Star and Venus was her name.

Those ancient Latins had a similar name for the star Algol, viz: Caput Larvae, the Spectre's Head. The Spectre can be precisely identified as the Gorgon Medusa, whose head, as well known in myth, would cast all who viewed upon it to stone. The Greeks, with their peculiar genius for casting their quotidian affairs into the eternal heavens, preserved her myth entire in the stars. So even in today's depiction of the constellations, Perseus, conqueror of the Gorgon, holds her head toward his bride Andromeda, rescued by means of that same awful head, who shares her star Alpheratz with that of Pegasus, great winged horse which sprang into life at the moment the Gorgon's head was cut by Perseus. How small, comfortable, closely connected was the Greeks' world with that of their gods and heavens. Only the astrologers, great Kepler and Tycho Brahe once among them, share those beliefs in these enlightened days, and even they would not, if, like me, they could feel only a vast gulf of silence, bridged by signs and touches and marks on paper, impermanent and ephemeral.

Communicated my discovery to my erstwhile tutor and present colleague, Mr. Edward Pigott, whose researches into the variabilities of stars I have endeavored to emulate. This sudden change may have new meaning unknown to any other star. We observed together on the following night but found that Algol had returned to its previous state in the second magnitude. On those rare nights in November and into December with clear skies, its restoration into apparent stability remained constant. Mr. P.'s disappointment is evident in the way that his physical aspect darkens with every fruitless visit and in his increasing interest in other observations. He has not said thus to me directly. Though we converse and argue heatedly concerning scientific subjects, upon meeting we set immediately to work, wasting no energies in the difficult communication of social discourse. His lips perforce fade in the darkness of my observatory: I speak in my halting way only as necessary here on Earth to guide him across the heavens, where words would be tiny and useless things and all men equally deaf.

During the chill of post-Christmas evenings, my breath streams into the sky in white gusts like earthly comets. When the quickening breezes die, all is silent, if silence is judged as I do by its quality of movement. So judge how encompassing the sound this evening when I turned my scope to Algol and watched it, alone of all the stars in the heaven, dim, dim a full magnitude and return to its full majesty of brightness, all in

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the course of a single evening. This singular phenomenon, I think, can't be accounted for in any other manner than that of supposing it to have suffered an eclipse by the interposition of a planet or other body revolving around it. A planet. It is the second world I have found, after my discovery of this one.

The good S[r] William Herschel has but recently established that Mira, Omicron Ceti, known as the Wonderful Star, has become almost as bright as the blazing Aldebaran, but it varies over no fixed timetable, its average period but short a month of a year. Perhaps Mira has great spots on its body, vaster and darker than those on the sun, which so deeply dim its brightness as the star revolves. Master Galileo did first discover that the sun, our own star, was not the perfect object of antiquity, but a spotted sphere, with great dark patches, like pox, girdling its body. 'Twas the true beginning of modern science, for even Copernicus in diminishing the earth to its present role of wandering star, kept the heavens and their perfect circles in all their glory. For that which is perfect cannot be fathomed by that which is not, but we all in our bodies are imperfect each in our way.

To the Chinese, Algol was known as Tsieh She, the piled-up corpses. Did they know of the star's winking, can that be the reason for these names of malignancy and death? Nothing in the ancient records conveys a supposition of its inconstancy. The Italian, Montanari, as Pigott reminds me, reported a variability in Algol's light more than a century previous, but it was only a general and vague information. Would that Kepler were here today, for in his dual role of scientist and mystic mayhap he could explain the aversion the astrologers felt for Algol, why they felt it was the most unfortunate and dangerous star in the entire heavens.

Midnight. The Minster Clock is striking, for I see the unconscious movements of the lips of my faithful servant as he counts the strokes for me. I must mark the time of my clock at the last stroke of the Minster and Mr. Pigott must do the same with his so that our observations may be synchronized. My family lives in its town house in the Minster Yard, within the close of the Cathedral and Metropolitan Church of Saint Peter of York, but Mr. P. has found by accurate trials that sound takes up one second to come the distance of about one-fourth mile from the clock to his observatory. How it astounded me when I learned that sound has speed and that it must be accounted for. Mr. Pigott informs me that the distance of a lightning strike can be divined by counting the seconds until the peal of thunder thus caused. He claims this is another of the

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practical uses of sounds. Still, I notice that he jumps no less than I when the sky is suddenly rent by a lightning bolt; and only he jumps a second time when the thunder passes me by, oblivious.

Speedy Mercury takes but eighty-eight days to orbit the sun, so swift a pace that the Romans named it after the fleet-footed messenger of their gods. It passes credulity that another planet's orbit could be measured in one-thirtieth of the time and yet our evidence shows conclusively that the total period of Algol's eclipse is astonishingly short; $2^{d}20^{h}45^{m}$. What manner of being can this be? If I lived on that planet I would now be just 2372 years of age. Could star or planet or any body known survive such stresses without tearing itself to shreds? More and more I wonder if the ancients did not name correctly. Though if Demon this planet be, at least it will not vex its mischief elsewhere, for what could this monster feel aught dizziness?

Our discovery is known in London! The Astronomer Royal, Nevil Maskelyne, did write to Herschel telling him of our wondrous news. Herschel, I hear, is hurrying to share in the observations. London is ablaze with the news. All is glory, except that I did hear of a passage from a letter that S^{r} Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, himself wrote to Herschel describing me as "a deaf & dumb man, grandson of S^{r} John Goodricke who has for some years amused himself with astronomy." Condescending bastard. Through dark and cold and mist and cloud have I stood naked eye and with my scope, alone and side by side with Mr. Pigott, and never once have the stars whispered a secret to him that I have not divined myself in equal time, at equal cost.

Spring is the worst season for viewing the heavens in England. A few stars were once visible this night but roiling clouds this moment shut them off, as if they had caught a glimpse of Medusa's writhing hair and their dazzling, twinkling light turned instanter to dull, grey stone. When first studying Algol, I sometimes wondered what must be the thoughts of one who was caught in her mortal gaze and felt the curtain of deadness descend. But can it be so different from my life as an infant, when the pall of disease settled upon my body, and, lifting, turned my ears to stone? I say I miss sound not, and yet could it not be that Medusa's victims also came to welcome the denseness, the solidity, the immortality of their lives as rock?

Sent off my paper, "A Series of Observations On, and A Discovery of, the Period of the Variation of the Light of the Bright Star in the head of Medusa, Called Algol," to the Royal Society and it was read on the 15th

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of this month May, 1783. I say in it, ". . . the intention of this paper is to communicate facts, not conjectures," for I must needs be formal to convince the likes of Banks of the worth and value of the observations that he may not again think I merely amuse myself. It is wholly a lie, to be sure. True, facts are the stepping stones to answers and answers the very commodities of civilization. And yet, all I do, every day, and with every observation and every thought, is use my hard won language to conjecture. To be without language is to live solely in a world of the most factual concreteness; think of the stars stripped of myth and wonder, naught but cold, pale specks of light, mute and storyless as a tongueless beggar with his can.

How vastly different must that world circling Algol be, a gulf of difference so monstrous that all variations here on Earth must be as nothing to it. At times I fancy that I see Perseus himself, hero, demigod, holding aloft the still-living head of Medusa. Once every sixty-nine hours she exhibits her powers and dims Algol's very light. But Algol always recovers, and shines as brightly as ever before: no matter how often Medusa strikes her killing blow, the Demon's Head shines on, diminished only for a small fraction of its long day. I take comfort from the thought, those days when my affliction is read as idiocy, and the ignorant in the town play their games and tricks when they think I cannot apprehend. I know then that my light is only momentarily dimmed, and that my name will cast bright shadows on posterity, who listens to its past as it always has, with signs and touches and marks on paper, impermanent and ephemeral, fact and legend and myth, now and forevermore.

John Goodricke was awarded the Copley Medal of the Royal Society—an annual award for the most significant discovery in science—in 1784. Later that year he would discover two other classes of variable stars, including the Cepheids, which were to become the celestial yardsticks, used for gauging distances to other galaxies. In 1786, Goodricke was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society two weeks before his death at the age of 21, "in the consequence of a cold from exposure to night air in astronomical observations." There is to this day a Goodricke Society in York devoted to helping and caring for children who are born without hearing or speech. ●

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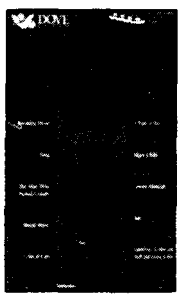

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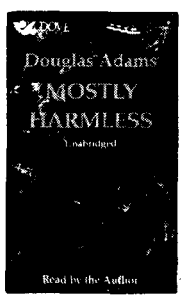

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THE DEATH OF THE MASTER CANNONEER

Bruce Bethke and
Phillip C. Jennings

The creators of this imaginative swashbuckling pirate tale with a hard SF twist are now at work on a collaborative novel. Phillip C. Jennings has had stories published in *Amazing*, and "The Death of the Master Cannoneer" is his eighth tale for *Asimov's*. Mr. Jennings has just moved from a small town in Minnesota to Minneapolis, while Bruce Bethke resides in St. Paul, Minnesota. Mr. Bethke has sold stories to *Aboriginal SF*, *Amazing*, *Hitchcock*, *Weird Tales*, and a host of other places. He has had one novel, *Maverick*, published in the Isaac Asimov's Robot City series, and he's sold another novel to Baen Books. The following tale marks his first appearance in our pages.

art: Gary Freeman

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Paying *eight* gold florins for a thin wooden tube and two bits of primitive Dutch glass ran strictly counter to my captain's nature. I can't imagine how young Jeremy persuaded him; to my mind, it seemed a waste. When I remember the fine instruments sitting on depot shelves back where *I* came from . . .

But, as I so often reminded myself, I was a long way from home. We were five days out of Tortuga, and then and there Captain Astor's expensive toy seemed an excellent investment, for it allowed us to spy a fat Spanish galleon a full two hours before she saw us. Tradewinds and the morning sun both were behind us, all to our advantage. By the time the Spaniard was alerted, we'd closed to within half an English league. My master sent the cabin boy running to fetch me.

"Beyazid! Beyazid, you're wanted above!"

A minute later, I bounced up the steps to the poopdeck with a grace that belied my twenty-stone weight. A thousand leagues beyond the farthest reach of Barbary, I thought it wise to look formidable: a shavepated giant, with a ready smile, a beard tough enough to scrub off barnacles, and a lust for human blood that many people found appalling. Luckily for us both, it was the last trait that the captain found the *most* useful.

"You sent for me, Captain Astor?" I asked.

He pointed to the galleon, gamely beating to windward a mile and a half off. "Master Beyazid, I wish to speak to the captain of yon vessel. Sadly, he seems in a terrible haste. Can you suggest how we might persuade him to tarry?"

I turned and studied the galleon. "Were this war," I said at last, "I should jibe soon and cross her bow. At best she could bring four cannon to bear, while you'd have a full broadside. Flaming shot in the rigging would state your message, I think."

He shook his head. "Oh, Beyazid, what am I to do with you? This is *business*. My letters of marque authorize me to seize King Philip's property, not wantonly slaughter his subjects. A burning wreck is no use to me."

I shrugged. "Then use chain shot. That should strip her rigging, yet leave her afloat."

"Agreed. Master Beyazid, will you ready—"

"Captain Astor!" young Jeremy shouted down from the crow's nest. "They've scrambled men into the rigging!"

"Musketeers?" the captain asked hopefully.

Jeremy peered through the spy-glass again. "No, sir! They're changing sail!"

"*That's* not very sporting," I grumbled.

Slowly the galleon crossed to a starboard tack, losing much of her

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forward momentum in the process. I was pleased at how she wallowed: she must be carrying a heavy cargo indeed. Dirty canvas sails blossomed from her topyards. Captain Astor tore off his hat and threw it to the deck. "The idiot!"

"Sir?" I asked.

"Look at her!" he said, pointing. "They've put up every rag they can fly and gone on a beam reach for Hispaniola!"

"So? The *Hecate* can easily run her down."

"But look at the way she lists! Her gun deck must be awash on the portside. It's a wonder she doesn't capsize!"

I smiled, baring my—special—teeth. "We must rescue her from the ineptitude of her captain."

Astor picked up his hat, dusted it off, and set it firmly on his head again. "How, Master Beyazid? If we come on her from the leeward, she'll blanket our sails. We'll spend all day playing Achilles and the Tortoise with her. If we come on her from the windward, we can blanket *her*, but—"

"Our guns will be pointing at the water while our deck is an open target. I see." I knotted my thick fingers into my beard, scratched my chin, and thought. "Ah!" I said at last. "What if we were to stand a quarter-mile off her port beam? She'd not be able to blanket us then, yet the range and pitch of her deck would be perfect for canister shot. By the time she slacks sails and gets her guns out of the water—" I paused to smile "—we could be close enough for cutlass work."

The captain clapped me on the shoulder. "Well thought, dear Beyazid! I'll make a businessman of you yet!"

"May Allah take me before *that* happens," I said, and grinned again. It was almost a smile of friendship. Captain Astor was one of very few men who looked at my pointed teeth with curiosity rather than fear.

In practice, we changed the plan slightly. Putting the *Hecate* about, we gave chase as if we meant to overtake the Spaniard from the windward side. When we were close enough to see the sun glinting off the brass muzzles of her starboard-side sakers, we fell off the mark and crossed her stern. She fired one badly aimed volley from her sternchasers—but what're two smoothbore cannon?—before our first ranging shot turned her sterncastle into a bloody shambles. I'm *made* for what I do, if it involves mayhem. I rarely need a second ranging shot.

Three broadsides were a sufficient declaration of our intent. The Spaniard's crew was still struggling to slack sail and run out the port guns when we closed to grappling range. For a moment, I left my post, only to reappear at the hatch a few seconds later, bearing a cutlass in one hand and fighting the straps of my great steel cuirass with the other.

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Captain Astor laughed out loud. "Have a care, dear Beyazid!" he shouted. "Slip into the water wearing that thing and you'll sink like a stone!"

I scowled back at him. "Better to drown cleanly than have my belly slit open. At least I won't have to watch my guts twitch while I die!" Then I snugged down the last strap, lifted my cutlass, and turned to the rest of the boarding party. "Ready, gentlemen?"

The captain turned away. His rank kept him from the boarding party—or maybe that was just an excuse. Captain Astor hated mere butchery. The cutlass is a short, clumsy weapon, meant for seamen untrained in the art of swordsmanship. The Spaniards have another name for that blade—*machete*—and the vision of thirty louts hacking away at each other with machetes offended his high-flown sensibilities.

With a hand signal, I ordered the helmsman to close the gap. We bumped rails with the Spaniard. Grapples were thrown, men leapt across, and steel met steel. Astor took up his usual station at the starboard rail and manned his swivel-gun. I was inordinately fond of that gun: it was an old Florentine breechloader, but I'd modified it in a few inconspicuous ways to make it much faster to load and discharge. With the cabin boy squatting beside him on the deck, ready to put fresh oilpaper *cartouches* in the fired breech blocks, the captain contented himself with dispatching those Spaniards fool enough to climb the rigging with muskets. Meanwhile, I raged about the deck like a demon in steel. I was perhaps the poorest swordsman my foes would ever meet, but I made up for it in enthusiasm and luck. That was my act, at least; to hide my skill until the crucial moment, like a whore playing a virgin.

Within the quarter-hour, the twelve surviving Spaniards had thrown down their weapons and were begging for their lives. Our boarding party herded them onto the foredeck and tied them up. Captain Astor ordered more grapples thrown and the bond between us tightened. Then he crossed over with Jeremy Bright and the prize crew, and let us boarders run below to see what we could find.

What *I* found in the bilge had a toy dagger and claws like a cat. She raked and kicked, threw and cursed: I could only hope her spittle was not as lethal as her Spanish. I tore her sleeves hauling her up to the deck and into the light of day, and I don't mind thinking that she got a few bruises en route.

Before I got my own first good look at her, I heard Jeremy gasp. We were all on edge; when men gasp like that, it means trouble. Captain Astor drew his pistols and spun around, thumbing back the hammers as he did so. Then he stood puzzled, for he saw nothing more alarming than me climbing the final steps to the upper deck, with a tiger's grin on my face, and a slender, dark-haired woman over my shoulder.

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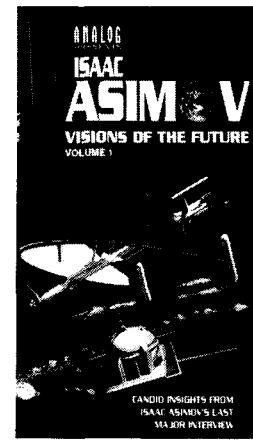

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It was the woman who had caught Jeremy's eye. I set her down, and she jerked and fluttered in my grip like a wounded bird, at once beautiful and defiant, yet fragile and quite defenseless—provided one ignored the scratches that covered my face and arms.

"Captain!" I said. "Look what I found hiding in the bilge. A pity *our* rats don't look like this!"

At the word *captain*, she froze. Then, with a look of infinite disgust on her perfect face, she slowly drew herself up to her full five-foot height and glared at him, hate smoldering in her dark eyes.

He smiled, doffed that busy hat of his, and bowed deeply. "Good morning, ma'am. My name is Captain Astor. Whom have I the honor of addressing?"

Her eyes narrowed. She smiled with icy regality. "Oh? Then *you* command this company of Moorish filth and Protestant swine?" Her smile held a moment longer; just long enough for me to relax my grip. Then she leapt at him, claws flailing, a stream of curses to shock a longshoreman boiling out of her mouth.

Captain Astor sidestepped to put me out of his line of fire, not from fear of this wildcat, and perhaps that's the truth. Having shown such regard for my safety, with his left pistol he shot the silver-and-tortoise comb out of her long, dark hair, and maybe that was done with cold calculation too, ice versus fire. Only then, when she was almost close enough to kiss the muzzle of his loaded right pistol, did she stop and stand, fear and hate burning in her eyes.

"I repeat, madam," the captain said quietly. "Whom have I the honor of addressing?"

"Doña Elena Menéndez-Marqués," she hissed, as if the name were a curse. "Remember that. Long after the bones of your crew have rotted off the gibbets, *you* will still be alive, in torture, because you have laid hands on me!"

"Quite a tongue she has," I said. "Shall I cut it out for you?"

He gestured me back. "Any relation to Pedro Menéndez-Marqués?" he asked politely. "A niece, or sister, perhaps?"

"I am his *wife!*"

"Oh." Astor turned to young Jeremy. "Jeremy Bright, I would like to introduce you to the wife of the Governor Royal of La Florida. Madam? My first mate, Jeremy Bright. He will escort you to my cabin, where I will join you shortly to discuss reparations for this unfortunate accident." Jeremy's eyes went wide. The captain gave him a sharp glare that told him he was quite serious about the order.

With a shrug, Jeremy doffed his hat and bowed, then offered her his hand. She seemed uncertain, until I stepped forward to help. Shrinking

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from me as if I were an ogre (an honest mistake), she eagerly took Jeremy's hand.

When they had crossed over to the *Hecate*, Astor turned to me. "You have half an hour," he whispered. "The winds are freshening for a storm: it'll roll up soon enough. Find a prize crew; married men all, *happily* married or badly in love, and keen to get back to their darlings, if you can find so many."

"Some of the Spaniard's crew seem willing to join us," I suggested.

"Yes, but switch them to the *Hecate*, where they won't know their way around, and can work under our careful eyes."

The captain went to the rail and crossed over. An hour later, we stood together at the stern, feeling the *Hecate*'s deck tilt in the gusting breeze, listening to Doña Elena shrieking like a harpy in Astor's cabin, and watching the Spaniard dwindle behind us, shrinking small beneath dark lowering clouds. "She's a good ship. She'll easily be worth five thousand when she's properly rigged out," I said.

Captain Astor's mind was elsewhere. "Do you realize who our new passenger is, Master Beyazid?"

I cocked an ear to the fountain of invective jetting up from belowdecks. "By her accent, I should say a Castilian noblewoman. Though she has a vocabulary not commonly taught in convent school."

Astor sighed. "She is the wife of the Governor Royal. If he is at all devoted to her—and given that she's young and beautiful, we can assume he is—we will not be welcome in La Tortuga until we are rid of her. In fact, I cannot think of a single place in the entire Caribbean where it would be safe to hold her!"

I shrugged. "Very well. Feed her to the fish."

Captain Astor smiled. "Beyazid, even in the most adverse accident there is hope for profit. There must be; it's one of the fundamental laws of my existence." He looked back at the Spaniard, now just a toy on the horizon. "If we were to ransom Doña Elena ourselves, we might have trouble escaping with our skins. The governor of the English colony at Roanoke, however . . ."

Lightning flashed. Instinctively I began counting the time until the thunder reached us, just over five seconds later. "About one sea-mile away," Astor said.

"Sir?" I asked, playing the Turk from Barbary. What would I know of the speed of sound?

Astor shook his head. "Just thinking out loud." He turned to the helmsman. "Mr. Cobb, set course for Saba."

Three days after the storm blew out, sweet night lay heavily on the *Hecate*. I'd come up out of the stink of rum and flatulence and slung my

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hammock between two cannon. The ship rocked gently in the swell, the soft waves lapping against the hull, the sails full and creaking in the light southerly breeze. It should have been very relaxing. But it was a clear, moonlit night, and no matter how hard I sought sleep, I watched the stars turning through their slow rotation. Ahead of us, Cetus had just risen. Off to the south, I could make out Aquarius, and below that, Piscis Australis. Fomalhaut hung low and bright in the sky.

The deck creaked. "Sleeping on deck again, Beyazid?"

"I fear so, Captain. It's quieter up here." I chuckled. "Not like in your cabin, eh?"

Captain Astor sighed. "The storm's fury was as nothing compared to Doña Elena."

"I thought she was settling down. I no longer hear crockery breaking."

"We've switched to pewter," he said, shrugging.

I made to rise, but the captain held up his hand. Very well, then, no formalities. "Perhaps you need a fairer face," I said. "She seems to like Jeremy Bright well enough."

"He's welcome to her. I for one shall be glad to be rid of the shrew."

I lifted my head and sniffed the breeze. "I smell land. Trees and damp earth. We must be close to Saba."

"You have a remarkable nose, friend. I put us three days out. You must be smelling Aves."

"It would be nice to look and know for certain. A pity your spy glass does not work at night, eh?"

"Oh, it does," the captain answered off-handedly. "The problem is to find something in the night worth the gazing."

I paused, my heart beginning to race. "Captain," I asked gently. "Have you ever looked at the stars through it? Or Jupiter, perhaps?"

"The stars are lights to steer by," he answered. "Nothing more. I only look at things that interest me." Then he changed the subject. "Beyazid, how long have we known each other?"

I thought. "Six years. Two with Drake, and now four aboard the *Hecate*."

"All this time I've known you, and yet I still have one question. How did a Turk like you come to be in the service of the Queen of England?"

I turned to the wind, scratched at my beard, and laughed. "That's no mystery, Captain. I served in the navy of the Magnificent. Many of us were strong enough swimmers to survive the battle of Lepanto. After that I took work where I could find it."

"Lepanto!" The captain showed surprise. "Why that was—twenty years ago? More? You certainly don't look your age!"

"I made a deal with the devil," I said casually. "I'll never grow old."

Astor stepped back. "You've met Satan?"

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Tonight I chose not to play my master's games. "Not Satan. A different devil." I rubbed my shaven pate and turned around. "As long as we're on mysteries, I have a question I've always wanted to ask you."

"Yes?" he said cautiously.

"Captain Astor: Your name is English. Your clothes, English. Your letters of marque and flag, English. Yet your speech is not quite right. Sometimes you try too hard. In unguarded moments, your accent falters."

He said nothing. I watched his hand inch toward the pistol in his belt.

"Where are you from, Captain?"

He sighed. "Nowhere, Beyazid."

"An odd place to call home, Captain."

"Home!" His fingers paused on the grip of his pistol. "I—I was on the wrong side of a disputed succession. It may as well have been nowhere. I cannot show my face there again and live. Is that enough?"

"A sad thing, to see a prince become a fugitive."

His fingers tightened. "I didn't say *I* was the heir."

"Forgive me, sir. I assumed . . ." I took a deep breath and turned to stare out to sea. "Captain, I have a confession to make. In my country, we have a grim custom. Whenever the succession is in doubt, the first heir to physically sit on the throne is proclaimed king. Fool, thief, or butcher, as soon as he sits on the throne, the army unites behind him, and assassins are sent out to . . . *clarify* his right to rule.

"I was such an assassin, Captain. Gifted in strange ways, I trained all my life for the day I might hunt a certain prince."

By now he must have had his thumb on the hammer of his pistol. I listened for him to cock it. No? Very well, I spoke on: "Something went wrong with my mission. My prince was in command of one of our distant outposts. When he learned that his uncle had seized the throne, he stole a small ship and ran. I followed. Both his ship and mine foundered on landfall, and in the wreck, my head was injured." I paused, staring at him intently. "No, not injured, cured. I bled, but the wound *freed* me. I'd spent a lifetime studying my prince, preparing for the day I'd kill him. After the accident, I realized that *he* was the one who deserved to sit upon the throne."

"So you let him go?"

I sighed. "No. My patrons would simply have sent more assassins. Instead, I chose to watch over him, waiting for the day the throne might be vacant again, and doing my best to guard his life. First I claimed to have killed him. Then, for years, I sent misleading reports to my patrons. Twice I even slew other assassins who came nigh to stumbling across him. And yet, for all my concern for his life, there were days I longed to wring his neck."

"*Why?*" As the captain spoke, he finally cocked back the hammer.

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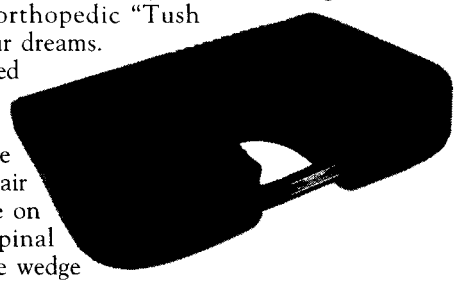

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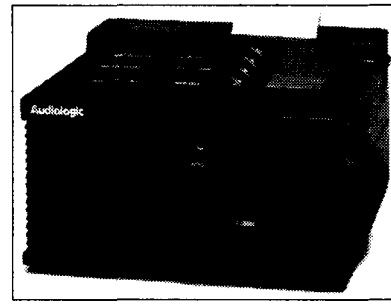

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Cleverly done. Were my ears those of normal men, I'd never have heard the sound.

I turned to see him silhouetted against the stars. "Because he never once acknowledged me! In all those years, he never once trusted me enough to tell me his true name!"

"Perhaps he thought you were merely unsure of your target," Captain Astor said gently. "Or perhaps he thought he was incredibly lucky, and never even knew you were there."

"Perhaps," I said. My captain turned again, to stare at the sea awhile longer. "I would never hurt you, Captain Astor," I said softly. "You must believe that."

He did not answer. He waited a few moments, then turned and walked away. "Nor I you," he whispered, at a distance only my ears could hear.

Three days later, we raised Saba, a little green jewel of an island set in the northern Leewards. Even a privateer must have a home port, and Saba was the *Hecate*'s. We took one turn around the island to make sure we wouldn't scare off any paying customers, then late in the afternoon sailed into the small natural harbor and made fast to the quay. The town had grown since our last visit, six months ago. I now counted twenty-three whitewashed houses around the harbor, and four new fishing boats drawn up on the beach. The crowd welcoming us from the shore presented an interesting sight as well: I saw far more children than I remembered. It looked like Saba was now home to perhaps a hundred souls. Along with English ship-jumpers, French Huguenots, Carib Indians, and escaped Moorish slaves, there was an important new element: women, children, and pensioners of the *Hecate*'s crew.

As soon as we made fast to the quay, most of the crew went ashore, and the captain went up to the sterncastle to direct the unloading of supplies. Surprising as it may seem, the *Hecate* also carried cargo. Sugar cane and bananas grew well on Saba, but not much else. The passing ships that stopped in for fresh fruit, dried fish, and smoked meat supplied some things, but the islanders depended on the *Hecate* for grain and beans. Astor had high hopes that the Sabans would someday be able to pay for their supplies by selling rum. Already he was talking about the distillery he would build with Doña Elena's ransom.

I bounded up the stairs to join him, a broad grin on my face. "Smell that, captain?"

He paused to sniff the wind. "Boucans!" Saba's Huguenots smoke animal carcasses on racks they call *boucans*. The passing ships who buy the meat call the cooks *boucaniers*, hence *buccaneer*.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "They're roasting pigs. We'll eat like infidels tonight!"

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We were both still standing there, savoring the thought of the feast to come, when Jeremy Bright came up from belowdecks. "Captain Astor? It's Mistress Menéndez. She says she'd sell her soul just to walk solid land for a few hours. Can I take her ashore? After all, Saba's an island. Where could she go?"

The captain considered. "Very well, Jeremy. Take the harpy ashore. Let her stretch her wings." Then he had a second thought. "But Beyazid, will you go with them, just to be safe?"

I shot him a look that would have blistered the skin off a lesser man. That Spanish bitch! "My . . . *pleasure*, captain," I grunted, in a tone that made it obvious it was no such thing.

He smiled at me. "Don't worry, friend. I'll save an entire pig just for you." Meanwhile Jeremy left to bring Doña Elena up from belowdecks. Together the three of us left the ship.

We reached the forested hillside a hundred feet beyond the last house. What happened then was my own stupid fault. My mind was far away on other things than duty, on rum and song and a dusky ex-slave of ample proportions whom I meant to get to know these next few days, and anyhow, Jeremy was the last man I'd have thought capable of treachery. But then, love—Spanish love in particular—is the next closest thing to madness.

Doña Elena stumbled and lost the heel to her shoe, or so she said, and bade Jeremy and me hunt for it. As I bent down, he stabbed me through from behind—how *cold* his steel felt, quenched in my own hot liquids! And then the pain! They might have fled then, but I was too thick-witted to feign death, and so he was forced to butcher me front and sides, swearing at me as I fumbled out my sword and slashed back—this monster who lurched and roared and would not fall, not until I'd nigh bled myself dry.

Clutching his lesser cuts, Jeremy led the bitch off one way, and I tried to crawl the other. A pair of children saw me, and ran off shouting.

Sealing off my anguish took all my concentration. I can't say how long it took for a crowd to collect in a semicircle, and watch me pull myself up against a tree. What they saw made them freeze in awe and horror; they all wore the same face, from right to left, high and low. Both pistols drawn, Captain Astor burst through this useless rout, shouting "For God's sake, let me pass!"

Then he stopped short. His eyes fastened on my wounds. My belly had been laid open by one wild slash that ran from my lowest left rib to the opposite hip. In my lap lay a puddle of blood, organs, and filth.

Where men fight with edged weapons, a man's innards are not an unusual sight. Those who sailed the *Hecate* had seen many a man's gut split open. But *this* time. . . . There were *things*, in my body. Things that

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I was now helpless to hide. Strange, wet shapes. Organs of odd color, glistening softly in the dying sunlight. Pipes that gleamed like silver and gold, pulsing and shuddering. Jeweled boxes, bits of metal, *wires* strung through me like a shining spider web, and granular lumps that looked to be made from carved stone.

The captain uncocked his pistols and put them back into his belt. He stood slowly, and calmly asked the four crewmen in the crowd what had happened, sparing me the need to talk.

None knew, but all guessed easily enough. Cobb, the helmsman, stepped forward. He looked at my steaming body. In a voice as soft as the rustle of Death's robe, he asked, "Captain, what *is* he?"

Astor turned back to look again. Already flies were gathering. "I confess I do not know." He took off his hat and stared. "He spoke of—he spoke of a devil's bargain."

"Yes," I croaked. "Devils . . . devils come . . ."

The crowd stepped back, some of them, and they began to mutter. Deep in my spilled bowels, on one of the silver jewel boxes, a tiny red light began to wink.

Frantically, Captain Astor scanned the sky. The moon had not yet risen; that meant he might still have time. There was no time for role-playing, though. Putting his hat back on, he turned to the helmsman. "You! Cobb! Clear this crowd off to the far side of town and use the crew to keep them there. The things that may happen this night are nothing for mortal eyes to see. I fear Old Satan will come to take his own."

We hardly had to wait the minute out, so quickly did the people flee from sight and earshot. The captain bent close and waved off my flies. "What are your chances?"

"Almost too good, if my patrons respond," I gasped. "There's some chance they can keep me alive, and—fix—me." Astor's eyes narrowed. I nodded to confirm my warning. "Fix me *altogether*, and completely, in which case . . . I'll come back to kill you."

"You'd have to find me first."

"I'll find you, if you go to Roanoke. See how well I mark your thoughts? It would have been your plan to go there. I can warn you now as your friend, but all this knowledge will soon belong to your enemy." I weathered a seizure of pain. "You're a fool, to take any risk at all. Finish Jeremy's work. Kill me now. *I'll* be dead anyhow, the Turk who loved you. Utterly dead. They'll give me a new name, a new face, and new allegiances."

Astor looked skyward. "They may not bother to come. You have not pleased them, I think. Yes, I'd rather take that chance, or any number of other chances, than sever your thick neck. There are enough fishing

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boats around; I can easily take one in the dark and be far away from here by dawn."

He stood, and thrust on his hat, and stepped back. "The game of empire is played by heartless rules, and winners cannot afford to make friends. I'd never have lasted long on that throne you spoke of. Perhaps you know that now, by the fact that I'm leaving you alive. And perhaps those who sent you will understand too, and decide that a tender fool like me isn't worth their trouble."

And then he left; fool or not. "Spare me a pistol," I begged. "I'll do your work myself." But by then he could not hear me, or chose not to. I was abandoned to my own long, slow thoughts.

As the last ruddy glow of the sun vanished from the horizon, I looked up at the night sky. Vega, Altair, Polaris. I turned my head to the southeast. Fomalhaut was still below the horizon. I took that as an omen. Silly, I knew; the advance base on Luna was what my captain really needed to worry about. After moonrise, it would take most of a watch before Luna could prep a team and send them in to investigate my beacon.

Would they come? Around midnight, damned old Fomalhaut rose into view. I had four hours yet to go. Four hours to hold fast to what I am, and think my own free thoughts. That pathetic little blue-white star; center of a cruel empire that makes cyborgs of men. Staring hard, I could almost imagine that I saw her planets: swollen Nardis in all his colors; beautiful Wokkenu, with her halo of rings.

And the fourth planet, a sweet green world the inhabitants call *Home*. Come what may, I could not hope I'd see that home again. ●

SILICON GUESTS

Inviting silicon creatures to dinner,
Remember they're hot and slow.
Put asbestos throws on the furniture.
Plan to dine till dawn.

They're fond of glass, marbles especially
Dissolving like horehound drops
In a silicon maw.
Aggies are favored.
But handfuls of puries, swirlies, cats-eyes,
Any kind of glassie is a treat.
They like crazed marbles, too,
Quick-fried in oil to crack inside.
Like peanut brickle, they think.

Mille fiore paperweights delight them.

—Ruth Berman

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PRESENCE OF GHOST DOUBLETS OF CODED NEURONAL PATTERNS: Relation to Synaptic Memory Storage

Robert Frazier

KEY WORDS code; trigger; recognition

ABSTRACT After the brainwipe takes
after his skull blanches inside to a pure chaos
there are only artificial means
only the neuro-stims and psychoactives
weak surrogates for those last years
Toumani cannot recognize

METHODS They unleash him at dusk
without ID tag without himself
an act of political vengeance

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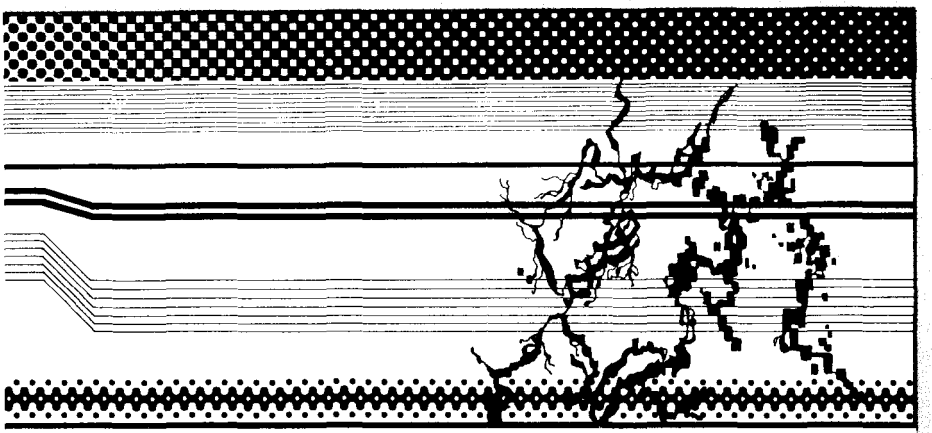

DISCUSSION

Toumani wanders the African marketplace
of red and yellow fruit the size of hand
grenades
squash shaped like truck bombs
he shows no recognition
griots celebrate, pluck their kora music
nagging at him with voices of tradition
he ranges into the rubbish-strewn alleys beyond
witches, fallen tribal chiefs, drug dens, safe
houses
no recognition
and sure, he owns his freedom now
he can use any bathroom, any train seat, any
door
yet in conclusion, realize this
the trigger chip lodged in his brain stem
waits to unleash a miniature Armageddon
awaits that cry of revolution to trip the light
that sign of one man / one vote
a moment of recognition

APPENDIX A

Drugged, his best refuge is into the ghost
doublets
shades of old coded memories
neuronal residues
where faces Toumani strains to apprehend
loom black and friendly and vital and
nearly recognizable

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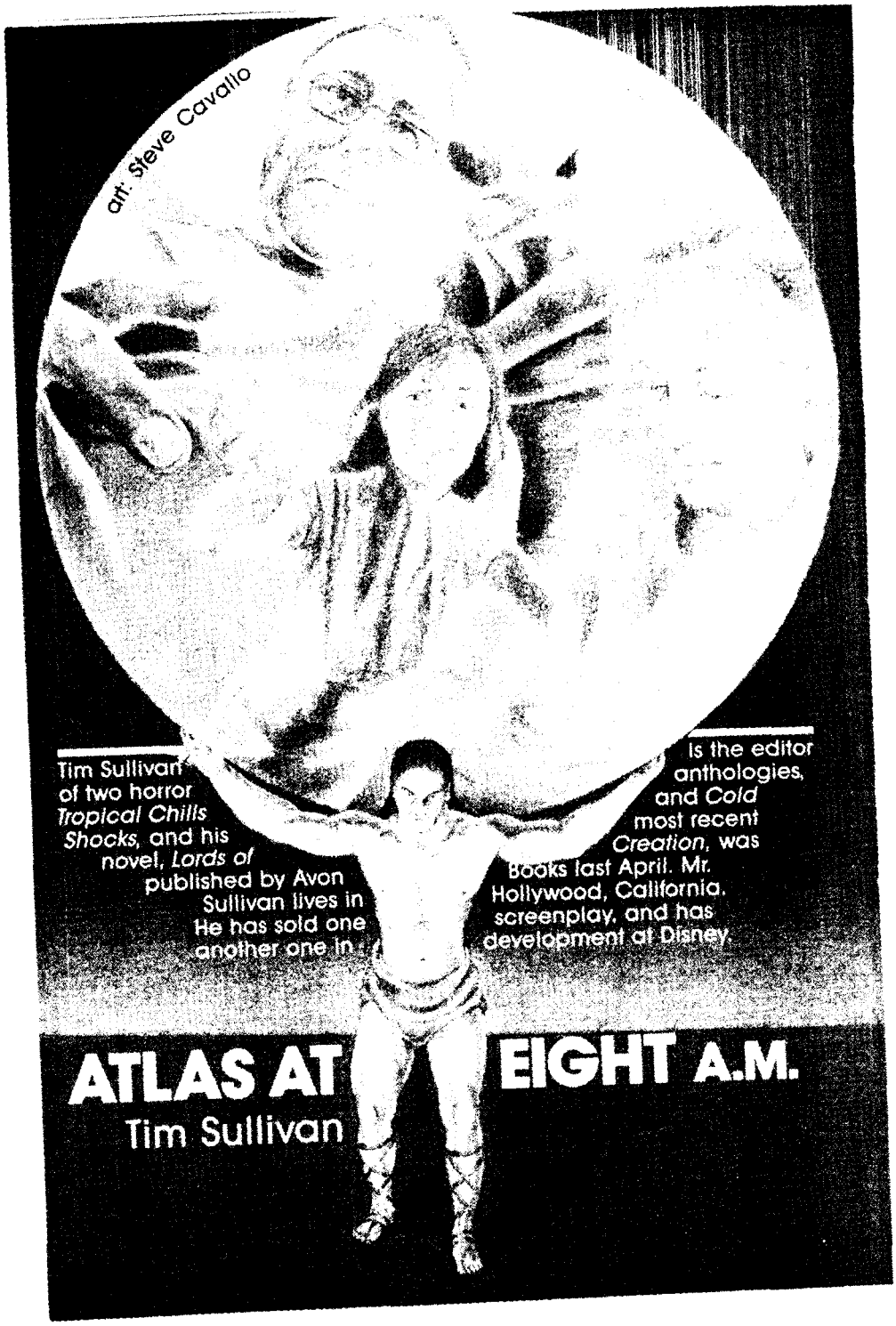
art: Steve Cavallo
Tim Sullivan is the editor of two horror anthologies, *Tropical Chills* and *Cold Shocks*, and his most recent novel, *Lords of Creation*, was published by Avon Books last April. Mr. Sullivan lives in Hollywood, California. He has sold one screenplay, and has another one in development at Disney.
ATLAS AT EIGHT A.M.
Tim Sullivan

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"Weren't those same people . . . ?" I can't quite finish the sentence, even though I know precisely what I want to say.

"Weren't those same people what?" Mary asks.

I look down into my steaming bowl of *aush*. "Nothing."

A group is singing "Happy Birthday" in the back of the restaurant—a little Afghan place neither of us have been to before. Even so, it seems to me that we were here last night and heard these people singing it then, too. Of course, that's absolutely impossible.

Mary is confused, both by what I have said and by my evasion of her question; a familiar pattern. I know she's getting angry, but there's nothing I can do.

"Maybe I should have stayed home," Mary says, a characteristic edge in her voice. "I thought I wasn't going to be sick anymore, but just looking at this soup makes me want to throw up."

"Mary . . ." I begin, but I don't know what to say. There is nothing to say. The abortion is over, done with. Receding into the past. Too late to change our minds.

"The doctor told me not to look." She is staring at me intensely. "But I did."

And then the tears start, right there in the restaurant while the waiter comes towards us bearing the main course on a tray. Procul Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale" plays in the background, vague and dreamlike.

"*Sabsi chalow* for you," the waiter says, smiling as he sets down a plate of lamb chunks in spinach over a bed of rice. He starts to say something about the Russians when he sees that Mary is crying. He hesitates, still holding the second steaming plate of *sabsi chalow*.

"Just put it down," I say to him as Mary searches her purse for a Kleenex. "It's okay."

He does as I ask and leaves us.

Mary wipes her face, regaining her composure. "I'm going to the ladies' room."

"Fine. I'll pay the bill while you're in there, and then we'll go home."

She nods, pushing back her chair with a scraping sound. I sit there for a few moments while our exotic meal cools, uneaten. It seems that I have been through this terrible scene *before*, somehow. I shrug; the bad things in life always seem to go on forever.

There is a bas-relief figure emerging from the wall before me, a man who is frozen in the motion of stepping forward into the restaurant, seemingly coming from ancient Afghanistan in the days of Alexander the Great. Ancient Bactria.

I pay the waiter, leaving him a nice tip when he brings the change. As soon as Mary comes out of the ladies' room I get up and walk to the door. As I open it, I feel unseasonal heat billow in from the outside. King

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Street is still, unusual even for quarter to one in the morning. We walk to the car, hearing only the buzz of the streetlights.

I drive north on US 1, stopping occasionally for the audibly clicking traffic lights. Then I cross over to Georgetown on Key Bridge. In a few minutes I pull up in front of Mary's apartment on M Street.

"Are you coming in?" she asks, noticing that I haven't shut off the engine. These are the first words she's spoken since we left the restaurant.

"For a minute or two, maybe."

Anger flashes across her pale face, ghostly in the streetlight glow. "Never mind. I really want to be by myself tonight."

"You okay?" I'm relieved that I don't have to go in. Unlike Mary, I don't want to be alone . . . I just don't want to be with *her* right now.

"I'll live." She hurls open the car door and climbs out. I watch her walk up the steps of the old apartment building and open the front door. In her white blouse and faded jeans, she is a wraith in the shadow of the blossoming cherry tree on the lawn. She slips inside before I remember that I haven't told her that I love her.

I sit and stare through the windshield, noticing that a damp film has formed on it. Putting the Civic in drive, I cruise aimlessly through Washington, trying to think. I am an asshole for the way I treat Mary, I know, but it just keeps happening; I can't quite get up the courage to break off with her, even though we're the mismatch of the century.

The Capitol Dome in the distance appears to be melting through the moisture on the glass. The monuments, brightly lit in the darkness, remind me of a monstrous cemetery.

"Here lies the human race," I murmur. "May it rest in peace." But it is not the human race I mourn. It's my baby, killed today by the mutual consent of its fucked-up parents.

I decide to cross the Potomac, to get away from these ghastly monuments. I'll go to a bottle club I belong to in Arlington, open till dawn and beyond. I turn on the defogger and work my way toward the 14th Street Bridge.

At this hour, it takes no time at all to get there. I take 395 to Columbia Pike and turn off on a side street. It isn't quite two as I pull into the parking lot. I go inside and order a Wild Turkey.

"Thanks," I say as the bartender sets the drink down in front of me. I take a sip and wince. Then I look around at the barflies, some of whom make low conversation. Waitresses just off work, hospital people still in their whites, a few dinner theater players. Familiar faces . . . but I've never seen any of them before tonight, have I? Types. You find them in any bar this time of night.

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"Got change for a buck, Sid?" I ask the barkeep. "I'd like to play the jukebox."

"Sure." I guess he doesn't remember my name, or he'd use it, in the professionally friendly fashion of bartenders everywhere. He punches the cash register and slips my dollar inside, bringing forth four quarters. Even this smacks of *déjà vu*. But of course it would, wouldn't it? I've been in this dimly lit gin mill a thousand times.

"Thanks." I rise and walk over to the massive old Seeburg in the corner, and glance at the selection numbers. I know what I want to hear. Sid's got nothing but oldies on the juke, and I punch the buttons for Dave Brubeck's "Take Five."

The intricate 5/4 timing of the Brubeck piece doesn't hold my attention quite the way it usually does, but that seems right too, like it's happened before. I know that doesn't make any sense, but there it is. I down the bourbon halfway through the tune, deciding that this place just isn't cheering me up tonight. I feel an urge to leave, and almost stand, but then, hesitating uneasily, I order another drink instead.

The door opens and a woman walks in. She sits two stools to my right and orders a gin and tonic.

She's good looking; tall, thin, and blonde.

"Can I buy the next drink?" I ask.

She looks at me solemnly, checking me out for a few moments. At last she nods. Sid sets her up with a fresh one as soon as she's finished with the first. I order another bourbon, too, starting to feel a little buzz. I ask her what her name is.

"Vera." Still without smiling.

"It's a funny night, Vera," I say.

"Oh?" She stares straight ahead at the big mirror behind the bar.

"I feel as though I've lived this night a thousand times," I say, realizing how absurd this must sound. A come-on stolen from old movie dialogue. I expect her to sneer at me.

But she doesn't.

"You know something?" she says, turning to look straight into my eyes. "You're not the only one."

"It's as though, as though tonight has been repeated over and over again," I go on, unable to control the emotional quaver in my voice, "but I'm only just now becoming aware of it."

"Right. Me too." Her beautiful eyes widen. "I think it's because something happened to me today."

I wait.

"It's . . . something that doesn't happen every day," she says.

"Tell me about it."

"It'll probably sound pretty ordinary to you."

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"Oh, I don't know. Try me."

"Well . . . I got fired. You know, RIFFed."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say. "That's tough."

"Yeah. Well, it's happening to a lot of people who've been working for the government. I don't know how I'm gonna manage now, but I guess I'll find a way."

"I'm sure you will, Vera."

"But I keep getting this feeling it's happened to me over and over." She looks at me warily. "Like you were saying before."

We're both silent for a while, and then, out of the blue, she says, "Let's go someplace."

"There aren't too many places to go at three in the morning," I reply.

"Oh yeah? How about your place?"

So we go to my place, driving through a thick fog. She follows me in a maroon Ford. Stopping at a light, I think of Mary. "It doesn't matter," I say, squinting at Vera's headlights in my rearview mirror. I don't know this girl who's coming home with me, but that doesn't matter, either. It is enough that she *knows*.

I pull onto the service road in front of my townhouse. She parks behind me, and I put my hand against the small of her back to steer her up the dark walk.

"I don't usually do this, you know," Vera says as I unlock the front door.

"Do what?"

"Go home with strange men."

"Of course not." I open the door and snap on the inside light. We go inside.

"I don't want to be alone tonight," Vera says; there is genuine fear in her voice. "Not tonight."

"I feel the same way."

"Please hold me," she says.

I hold her. Her body is soft but firm, and yet I feel no passion. We are both frightened, sharing some vague apprehension about this day being endlessly repeated. It isn't a notion that inspires lust.

"Why doesn't *everyone* notice that it's all happened before?" she says.

"Maybe it hasn't. Maybe we're imagining things."

"*Both* of us? Two total strangers with the same crazy idea?"

"It doesn't seem likely, does it."

"No."

"Maybe we're just more observant than most people." I gesture for her to sit down on the sofa while I fix drinks. "Or maybe it's because we both went through something very difficult today."

"You too, huh?"

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"Yeah, me too. . . . Suppose what we went through was so bad that we'd rather not keep repeating it."

"What would we *rather* do?" Vera says.

I shrugged. "Go on, I guess."

"Go on." She nods. "But to what?"

"Tomorrow, the next day, the day after that. Just like always."

"Why have we stopped going ahead?" Vera asks softly. "That's what doesn't make any sense."

"I don't know." I plop an ice cube in her gin and tonic, and join her on the sofa. "It seems that we go up to a certain point, and then . . ."

"And then back to yesterday."

"Or today." I take a slug of bourbon. "And the transition is so seamless that hardly anyone notices. What's worse, even those who notice have a hell of a time remembering."

"I wasn't quite sure until I started talking to you."

"All day, I've been uneasy, as though my mind was fighting against accepting things the way they appear to be."

"But why?"

I shake my head. "My guess is that this day has been so intolerable that my subconscious would rather face whatever lies in the future than repeat it one more time."

"But how many times have we been through our respective traumas before we began to suspect?"

Neither of us speak for awhile. We just sit there sipping our drinks, wondering what the future holds that can be so horrible the human race can't bear to face it.

"Maybe if we just wait here, expecting something to happen . . ." Vera's voice trails off.

"Then we might notice when we go back in time a day," I say. "We might remember."

"We might."

We sit and wait. About five, I am starting to get drowsy. I consider making coffee, but I can't seem to get up the energy to go to the kitchen. I'm about to speak to Vera again, but I see that she's sleeping. I stand and stretch, and put her feet up on the sofa gently so she'll be comfortable. Then I open the sliding glass doors and step out onto the balcony to look at the stars. Maybe I can make it till dawn, I think, seeing a dim glow on the horizon.

But I'm bone tired, and I'm beginning to suspect that I have indeed picked up a crazy woman. She has intuitively picked up on me, too; she is no doubt one of those people with an uncanny knack for getting on someone else's wavelength.

I wearily sit in the lawn chair on my balcony, looking down on brick

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apartment buildings and the back side of a shopping mall. I won't fall asleep out here, I tell myself.

But I'm mistaken.

The alarm goes off at eight. Eight-oh-one, to be precise. I fumble for it, cursing, and sit up in bed, groping until I silence its chirping.

"How'd I get in bed?" I mutter.

But nobody answers.

"Vera?" I say. But who is Vera? The woman I met last night at the bottle club. But where is she now? I get up slowly and look around the apartment. No sign of anybody.

"A dream," I croak, tasting my own fetid morning breath.

More like a nightmare. But I don't need a shrink to explain this particular dream. Today is the day I am to pick up Mary and take her to the clinic.

Tired as I am, I will go into D.C. and take care of business before meeting Mary. I shower, shave and dress, and then go to start up the car. I cross Memorial Bridge and tool up to E Street.

I find that people are quiet today in the east wing of Interior, almost in an expectant mood. It's probably just me. I assemble today's contracts, explain to my secretary what to do with them, and leave. I drive over to the National Gallery and feed a parking meter.

Mary is waiting for me under the giant Calder mobile in the lobby.

"You're on time for once," she says.

God, she can't resist sniping at me even today. She senses that my guilt lies heavy on me, an almost palpable thing, a vile worm crawling through my guts.

"The doctor is going to be late," she says. "He can't see me until two."

Great. Probably can't bear to pull himself away from his golf game. I nod. "Have you eaten?" I ask.

"I'm not hungry. Maybe a cup of coffee."

"Sounds good."

"First let me pick up something for my mother in the gift shop. It'll be Mother's Day soon, you know."

Mary doesn't notice the irony in this, which is typical. I keep my mouth shut as we ascend the stairs to the second level. The rays shafting through the skylight illuminate her face beautifully. She is an attractive brunette, in spite of the overbite, which gives her a quizzical look.

While she's looking through the souvenir art books, I slowly spin a post-card rack displaying reproductions of famous paintings. I remove one and examine it.

It's by Joan Miró, showing squiggles and amoebalike splotches of color on a sky-blue background. Beneath it is another reproduction of the same

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painting. This second card has a slightly different blue tint than the postcard I've removed from the rack, lighter. I look at the third to see yet another subtle variation. Behind this one is one with a hair-thin flaw cutting across the lower left hand corner.

Each person who buys one of these cards gets something different. They are only superficially the same, but you must look very closely to detect the difference.

"Ready for lunch?" Mary is behind me with a yellow bag in her hands.

I place the postcards back on the rack. "Sure am."

We walk down to the basement, to an underground passageway connecting the east and west buildings. There we ride on a moving walkway to the cafeteria.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, once we've bought our coffee and have sat down at a table.

"Lousy."

We sip the coffee in silence, watching a waterfall splash down from the street level fountain outside, against an immense sheet of glass on the north hall, here underground. The water gurgles through vents in the floor, mingling with the hum of the diners. There is a civil defense insignia on the wall next to it.

At one-fifteen, we walk to the car. There's a ticket under one of the windshield wipers; the meter has run out of time.

"I'll worry about this later," I say, unlocking the car door and stuffing the ticket in the glove compartment. Mary gets in the stifling front seat as I let myself in on the other side. In a few moments we are on our way to Falls Church, the air conditioner beginning to cool us.

We arrive at the clinic a few minutes early. It is a clean, freshly painted place. Several glum young women are reading magazines in the waiting room.

The receptionist gives Mary some forms to fill out. I find myself staring at her, almost certain I've met her sometime in the recent past. Unlikely; I've never been here before. She is a stranger, surely.

It's forty minutes before the doctor sees Mary. He's a serious looking man of about fifty. The two of them go into another room after Mary hands the receptionist the forms she's been filling out.

I know that he's explaining the dangers of abortion to her. The risk of infection, of damage to the uterus, even of death. But how do I know this? How do I know what he's saying at all?

Mary will tell me later, of course. She'll tell me everything, sparing no detail, no matter how it makes her feel. No matter how it makes *me* feel. Maybe she just likes to get a rise out of me, I don't know. That's just the way she is.

I pick up a copy of *Newsweek* lying on the formica coffee table in the

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center of the room. I start reading about the miserable failure of the summit at Oslo, but don't finish it. I'm depressed enough without this. Besides, I could swear I've read the article before, but it's dated for this week. I haven't read *Newsweek* in months.

I put the magazine down and stare out the window. Children are playing across the street. Occasionally their high voices can be heard over the air conditioner. It saddens me to hear them.

At last Mary appears, looking confused and yet almost triumphant. She pays the bill herself, though I have offered to give her the money. But I know she'll take half the money from me later.

"Do you want to go home now?" I ask her in the parking lot.

"No."

"Do you feel all right, then?"

"Yes, I feel all right. I'm fine."

"Where to, then?"

"The country . . . or at least a park."

"Okay." We get in the car and drive east on Route 50. Then I turn south on George Mason and drive to a park I know. We sit under a willow tree without speaking.

It is late afternoon when Mary asks me if our affair is over.

"Of course not," I say, lying. "Both of us have been through a lot, but things will be back to normal soon enough."

"It seems like forever," she says, "since this thing started."

"Then you've noticed it too." I'm grasping at straws. It just isn't like Mary to notice unusual things, especially when the effort requires a leap of imagination.

"Noticed what?" There is a note of annoyance to her question. Is he off on one of his weird flights of fancy? Can't he come down to earth just for today?

"Nothing."

Even this blank exchange possesses a chilling sameness. It isn't just that we have had a thousand such bathetic conversations; this one has happened before. I knew how it would go before it started.

I recall my dream of last night. Vera.

"I'm not feeling very well," Mary says.

"The anesthetic must be wearing off. I'd better take you home."

Traffic is heavy on the way to Georgetown. We cross the Potomac as we have so many times before, and at six we enter Mary's apartment. "I'm gonna take a shower," Mary says, "and then I think I'll lie down for a while."

"I guess I'll go home, then."

"No, please. Stay here, baby. You don't have to come upstairs with me.

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Stay down here and read, or watch TV, but don't leave me alone just yet. Please."

I am moved by her plea. "All right. I'll be right down here." I sit on the sofa while she goes up to the bathroom. Halfway up the stairs, she gags and rushes to the toilet. I hear her puking and fight the impulse to run out the door.

After the toilet flushes, I call to her, "Are you all right, Mary?"

"Christ," she rasps. "What do you *think?*"

I do not run to comfort her. I am emotionally numbed, and my only escape at the moment is to recall last night's dream in its every vivid detail.

It started in a restaurant around midnight. An Afghan place in Old Town, Alexandria. The restaurant is real enough. I've passed it many times. Tonight I'll go there, with or without Mary.

Having determined this, I feel a little better. I snap on the television and look at the news on the cable network channel. The economy's in rough shape, and war is spreading in the Middle East. The Oslo summit is getting nowhere fast.

Maybe that's it, I muse. Maybe the world's economy has become so intolerable that the G–7 are willing to throw it all away in one last nuclear conflagration. A communal nervous breakdown. To hell with it, boys, let's blow it all away. It's just not worth it anymore. A moment's madness, civilization an irretrievable ruin.

I flick the channel selector. *The Bad News Bears* is showing on the Movie Channel.

At quarter past eight, Mary comes downstairs wearing her robe.

"Feeling better?" I ask.

"A little."

"Want to go out somewhere?"

"Yeah, I think so."

I go up and take a shower while she dresses and puts on her makeup. There's a Bergman retrospective showing at the Circle Theater. Tonight's feature is *The Seventh Seal.*

Toward the end of the film, when all the people who have cheated Death are holed up in the Knight's castle, I have a vision. It is the only genuine revelation I have ever had, and it is this: Like the medieval peasants in the film, we all know the end is imminent. Perhaps at the moment the bombs go off, the combined psychic energy of the entire human race—the collective unconscious, if you will—somehow pushes time back a day. Maybe the energy of the blast helps, affecting the space/time continuum so that we may fulfill our desire to live this final day over . . . and over and over and over. . . .

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At eleven twenty-eight we leave the theater. "I'm kind of hungry," Mary says.

I take this as a positive sign. "What kind of food would you like?"

"Something different." She manages a little smile. "Not pickles and ice cream anymore."

"Well, I know a place that might be pretty exotic. It's an Afghan restaurant over in Old Town. I've driven past it a hundred times, and I hear it's excellent. Want to go over there?"

I frequently make fun of her for being too white bread and mayonnaise. Sometimes she balks, but she usually indulges my tastes in order to prove her sophistication. "Okay."

"What if you don't like what I order?"

She laughs. "You can order camel shit for all I care. I'm starved."

On the way, Mary tells me she is financially strapped. She wonders if I will pay for half the abortion.

"Of course," I say, without batting an eye. "I'll help in any way I can."

"It's not that easy, you know." Her voice is low, deliberate, accusing.

"What are you talking about, Mare?" Mare is an affectionate name she has often been called by since childhood. I use it now to soften what is coming.

"You know what I'm talking about. You can't just say you're glad to help and give me a check and then forget about it."

"Who says I'm going to forget about it?"

"You're going to drop me like a bad habit as soon as I've recovered."

Christ, how does she know? Is this the vaunted women's intuition?

"You don't care, do you?" She is merciless now, Mare or no Mare.

"Of course I care."

"You don't care that I lost my baby today."

"That's not true, Mary. It was *your* choice. I told you I'd abide by whatever decision you made, and you decided you didn't want to be tied down by a child. You decided to have an abortion."

"If I'd decided to have the baby, I suppose you wouldn't have put up an argument. I suppose you wouldn't have tried to talk me out of it."

Good God, is she so blind she can't see that the child would have been a terrible mistake? No wonder she doesn't notice anything unusual in the air, the crushing repetitiveness of it all. Such an insight requires some attention to the world outside one's own skin.

"You're probably right," I admit, knowing that it is useless to lie. "But let's try to enjoy our meal."

She remains silent while I search for a parking space. I finally find one down the street from the restaurant, and angle the Civic into it.

"How're you feeling?" I ask as we come up to the restaurant door.

"I'll live."

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Thank God her little scene is over, at least for the moment. I have too much on my mind for that. The end of the world, for Christ's sake. I take a deep breath before entering the restaurant.

If there's anything to my wild theory, if last night's meeting with Vera was real, I ought to know very soon. And if I'm flipping out . . . I'll know that too.

The maitre d' seats us, his face right out of my dream. Everything is the same. A clay figure stands out in relief on the back wall, the tables are arranged the same way, the waiters are identical. Every detail is the same.

There is only one *possible* explanation. I must have been here before, drunk on my ass, and do not consciously recall the incident. It's the only thing that makes sense. Everything else today was predictable enough, but this . . . this seems as real as death itself. And just as inevitable.

We are taken to the same table we were seated at in my dream.

Or *is* it the same table? Is my memory playing tricks on me? Am I suffering a schizoid episode because of what I've been through today? Logically, Mary should be the one to break down, but she is holding up just fine.

"You know," she once told me after a particularly vicious argument, "for someone who's always going on about art and philosophy and the goddamn Meaning of Life, you don't have a hell of a lot of compassion."

My reply? "I guess you just bring out the best in me, sweetheart."

But now, sitting in the Afghan restaurant on King Street, I don't feel like making wisecracks at Mary's expense. She's right: I have always lacked compassion. Always an elitist, always a snob.

Ordinarily, I would laugh at the people singing "Happy Birthday" in the back of the restaurant, disdain their conventional funmaking. But not tonight.

Mary becomes ill before our dinner of *sabsi chalow* arrives, remarking before she goes to the ladies' room that the *aush* makes her sick.

Be sick, I nearly say aloud. This is the last day you will ever have to be sick in . . . though you will be sick again and again in just this same way. At least you'll be alive.

I pay the bill and take Mary home. The drive is exactly as I remember it, right down to the tiniest detail. Even the Capitol Dome melting through my damp windshield.

I drive to Arlington. On the way, I think, what if I'm the only one? Like Atlas, every morning at eight, holding up the doomed earth by a sheer act of will? That's what it will take from now on. I will remember from now on. I will *know*.

Does such a reverie make me a prime candidate for the rubber room?

Not if Vera exists.

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My stomach is in my chest as I drive down Columbia Pike toward the bottle club. If Vera walks in, it has to be true. If she doesn't, I am surely suffering a nervous breakdown. Who would have ever thought it could happen to such a cold, analytical prick? And yet it is by far the more reasonable scenario.

A cool mist descends on my bare arms as I lock the car door. I am almost convinced now that it is all in my head. Just a little paranoia.

I go inside, into the dim lighting of the club.

Sid is polishing glasses as I sit at the bar. "Hey! How ya doin'?" he says.

He still doesn't remember my name. Why should he? I haven't been in here for weeks, months even. Unless I *was* in here last night, and the night before, and the night before that . . . unless the whole world has been turned upside down.

I listen to the soft voices of the other customers, who are the same people I remember from my dream. Or am I kidding myself? Do I *want* to recognize them? I really only see them as types: hospital types, theater types, newspaper types. I am unable to see their underlying individuality, their humanity.

This is my great failing as a human being. It is something I don't enjoy thinking about. It's much easier to lose oneself in art and reading, foreign films, and obscurantist works, than to face the fact that one is an asshole. I lost my baby today, and my reaction to this is to dump Mary after a suitable mourning period. The issue here is not the complex one of abortion, but love, compassion . . . or lack of same.

I lift my Wild Turkey to my lips with shaking hand, knowing fully for the first time that I have no right to judge Mary, or anyone else. My only right is to live and make the best of it. Have I done that? No. I work in a government office, applying myself minimally to meaningless busy work, accepting my promotions and pay raises as they come, creating nothing, helping no one—not even myself. Surely I have no right to bring an unwanted child into the world. Surely abortion was the correct choice; after all, it has prevented disaster, hasn't it?

Just as disaster has been avoided by aborting time in my paranoid fantasy.

"Got change for the jukebox, Sid?" I know what I want to hear.

In my dream, I didn't pay much attention to Brubeck's piece. Now I notice, however, how the piece is structured to always return to its starting point, no matter how intricately the sax riff is interwoven with the piano, bass, and drums. Its inevitability is what makes its form so appealing. The odd $^{5}/_{4}$ pattern constraining the instruments obsessively. It can never break out of its circular design . . . until the record wears out, as it inevitably must.

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"Another Wild Turkey?" I nod. While he fixes the drink, it occurs to me that this is the part that differs from all the other nights spent here at this bar. I have always left before the song ends. Except for last night, in my dream.

"Want me to run a tab?" Sid asks.

"Yeah." I'm such a paranoid nut case that I think the whole world depends on me for its survival. Atlas, supporting the planet on my shoulders. Savior of mankind. An unlikely role for a man like me.

"You okay?" Sid asks. "You don't look so hot."

"I'm all right. This straight bourbon will fix what ails me."

He nods and returns to his paper. Then the door opens and a girl walks in. She sits two stools over and orders a gin and tonic. She's tall, thin, and blonde . . . and I know her name, even though I have never met her. Vera.

She is aware of me staring at her, but she isn't about to make the first move.

I'm aching to talk to her, but I can't seem to open my mouth. It's as though my head were full of glue.

At last I turn to Sid. "Never mind running a tab on me, Sid. I'm leaving.

I slap down another buck and swing off my stool. I catch Vera's eye at this instant, and I know that there has been no mistake. She remembers too, although perhaps only vaguely, and what happened last night. What happens *tonight*. She is the same woman I held in my arms last night, seeking solace in her warmth.

I say nothing as I walk to the door, and I don't look back. It is not up to me to defy the will of the entire human race. Besides, I'm tired from the day's ordeal and from staying up late last night. I have to get up in a few hours and go to work . . . and then take Mary to the clinic to have our little mistake taken care of.

I snap on the car's stereo to the public radio station, expecting to hear Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. But no, the news is on, telling in calm tones of the acrimonious breakdown of the Oslo summit. I shut it off and drive through the early morning fog, not going home after all.

At last I come to the park where Mary and I will sit later today, after she sees the doctor. There is a dirt road where I park; then I get out and sit on a wooden bench.

Birdsong is all around me, the rush hour traffic barely audible in the distance as an occasional horn or squeal of tires. I notice the bright red tulips and bougainvillaea. Spring is lovely in this part of the country.

I sit and think about what I know as the sun rises. If too many people remember that the world ends every day, it might not work anymore. I

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will tell no one, and I will try to forget it myself. I will exert every ounce of strength to push it from my mind.

"It's all a dream," I say aloud, rising to go back to the car.

I am facing Washington in the east, when the flash comes. It is too bright and too low on the horizon to be the sun at eight in the morning. A huge, brilliant dome rises over the city, and the ground begins to ripple like waves on a pond. Buildings crumble and fall as the shock wave approaches, the monstrous mushroom cap spreading over all.

I fall back onto the bench and shut my eyes so tightly that they hurt. I will the vision of Armageddon to go away.

I pray that I will awaken in my bed, a stranger to the terrible truth once again. To see the clock say eight-oh-one . . . ●

NEXT ISSUE

Next month starts our 1993 season, and *that* means the start of another year of top-of-the-line, State-of-the-Art science fiction stories here at *Asimov's.*

Our cover story for January is "Mudzilla's Last Stand," by hot new writer **Allen Steele,** a fast-paced and funny look at the world of tractor-pulls, monster truck rallies, and demolition derbies—except a few years in the *future,* when a forty-foot-high red-white-and-blue All American (sort of) combat robot named Mudzilla is forced to take a break from his usual routine of stomping Toyotas and tearing Greyhound buses in half in order to face his greatest challenge, a challenge that *may* be more than he can handle.... Thrills! Chills! Stomped-on cars! Smoking ruins! Giant killer robots with guns! All right *here!* Next month! ROWWWWWWWRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR! Come on DOWN!!!

ALSO IN JANUARY: **Esther M. Friesner** spins a haunting and powerful tale of the reality *behind* the mask of Legend, in "Three Queens"; hot new Australian writer **Greg Egan** returns with a high-tech cautionary tale that explores the chilling fate of "The Extra"; Nebula-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** takes us "Beneath the Stars of Winter" for a compelling and compassionate story of love and human endurance set against the frozen desolate *gulags* of post-World War II Russia; **Rick Wilber** returns with a perverse and fascinating look at alien sex, human-alien politics, and the politics of family ties, in "With Twoclicks Watching"; **Rebecca Ore** makes an evocative *Asi-*

(Continued on page 168).

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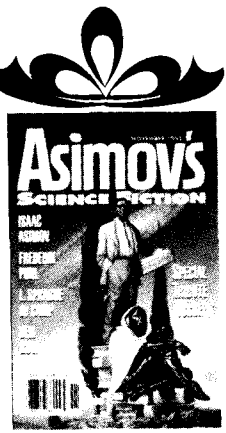

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MAHOUT

Jeff VanderMeer

Jeff VanderMeer is a young author whose American publications include tales in *Pulphouse* and *Starshore*, and who has also sold stories to the British magazine *Fear*, Czechoslovakia's *Svet Fantastiky*, and India's *2001*. Mr. VanderMeer spent some time in India as a child, and many of the [illegible] described in "Mahout" are based on his experiences there.

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"MARY: THE LARGEST LIVING LAND ANIMAL ON EARTH. 3 INCHES LARGER THAN JUMBO AND WEIGHING OVER 5 TONS . . . "
—Billboard for the Sparks Circus, 1916

You watch the bruised sky as the sun sets outside Dan's Eatery. Dan's lies off county road twelve, Tennessee. The farms and paint-peeled houses surrounding it form the town of Erwin.

Flocks of starlings mimic the dance of leaves on the dirt road outside. Rust-red leaves. Your hands are brown. People stare at you from other tables, someone whispering, " . . . East Indian darky." 1916: you are sixty-seven years old and thousands of miles from home.

You arrived with the circus early this morning—south about a mile, where the railroad tracks crisscross a small station, amphitheatre, and coal tipple: a staggering troupe of stiltmen, clowns wielding saws, and highwire women so stiff they cannot bend at the waist, at least until the next show. The trains don't even bother passing through Erwin, but this is your day off and you wanted to escape the swelter of people. Tomorrow your elephants, the ones you have trained for fifteen years, will perform for the Ringmaster in their fleet clumsy-footed way. After the elephant show, you will perform again: *Come see the amazing psychic! Can read your mind! Come see the Brahmin holy man!*

You are not truly psychic. Neither are you of the Brahmin caste. You wear a Sikh turban. They expect it, even though you are Hindu and the weather hot. But at least you can be near the elephants.

"I have been with the shows for three years and have never known the elephant to lose her temper before."
—Mr. Heron, press agent (*Johnson City Comet*, Sept. 14, 1916, pg. 1)

" 'Murderous Mary,' as she was termed by spectators, has been in the circus for fifteen years and this is the first time anyone has come to harm."

—*Nashville Banner*, Sept. 13, 1916, pg. 9

The light fades from the windows until the starlings are blurs of shadow and bar lamps reflect on the glass. You sweat despite the chill; the nervous tic under your right eye where the blood vessel has burst works in and out. Your hands become clenched claws.

The lady to the left—with the matted hair and distant stare—she thinks about her next trick, the dull slap of flesh on flesh . . . the ache in her body, her heart. *Tease, you tease too much* she thinks. The man at the bar who deliberately combs his few hairs and sips his whiskey—he fears his dog. It used to run for miles across his farm but now the farm

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is smaller, eaten away at the edges by bankers. His wife has left him. The dog has tumors, weak back legs, and cannot hold its bladder. It lies at home by the furnace and dreams of better days. The man hates the dog. He loves the dog. If he goes home, he might find it dead, and then he will be waiting to die. Alone.

The claws bite into your palms, draw blood.

The waitress leans over to take your plate and smiles. You smile back, her face blank to you. You can only sense the pain, enter minds through agony. Sometimes you block it by concentrating on dust motes or the pattern of raindrops on a blade of grass. You can escape it.

When you are with the solid shadows of your elephants, all the sharp edges fade away. Your clenched hands untense.

> "Suddenly, Mary collided its trunk vice-like about his body, lifted him ten feet in the air, then dashed him with fury to the ground. Before Eldridge had a chance to reach his feet, the elephant had him pinioned to the ground, and with the full force of her biestly (sic) fury is said to have sunk her giant tusks entirely through his body. The animal then trampled the dying form of Eldridge as if seeking a murderous triumph, then with a sudden . . . swing of her massive foot hurled his body into the crowd."
>
> —*Johnson City Staff* (Sept. 13, 1916, pg. 3)

You grew up in Jaipur, under the maharajah's benevolent neglect, a man who employed your parents as servants. A man who, twenty years later, would sell his elephants to the Americans to pay his debts, and your services with them.

Every day you suffered headaches or crying spells. The leper woman with her bag of shriveled flowers would ask you for coins and you saw the young woman inside her, the pretty one who would have married, laughed many days by the washing stones. If not for the decaying flesh. You ran from her, not understanding *how* or *why* you had these visions.

The merchant at the market would say, "Nice boy: have a sweet," smiling at your parents and you would hear, from deep inside his coiled thoughts: *Ugly child. Scrawny. No good for lifting sacks.* The headaches would pick away at your skull. You wondered why people lied so much.

Then, when you were seven, you met the elephant and its mahout. You went with your parents on holiday—to see the Amber Palace, a tilted terrace of fortifications and tile buildings and minarets atop a mountain ridge. The snake of road circled higher and higher. Below: fields and a lake.

You gnawed your lip bloody listening to the desperation beneath beggars' prayers and your father's impatience with them as you trudged along. Your mother you could not read. Never could.

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Then, sweaty, half way up—

The elephant. Straddling the road, one front foot alone larger than you and your parents. Trunk curled, tusks capped in gold, a gilded carriage upon its back. You gasped, stumbled. And looked into its eyes.

Long-lashed, black, with no hint of reflected light. Age wrinkles spiraled down into the eye. The elephant stared at you, measured you. You shivered. *Ganesh,* you thought. The elephant-headed god of luck and wisdom. You wanted a ride. You begged your father, clutched at your mother's sari. They, tired of walking, smiled, said yes.

That was when the mahout stepped from behind his elephant: a shriveled man with no flesh on his bones so that his head, small on another man, seemed large. A holy man. A wise man.

You stared at your future teacher unabashedly and he bowed, pressed his palms together.

"I am Arjun, mahout of the Amber Palace."

You, solemn, bowing also: "Gautam, boy of Jaipur."

He laughed. "And someday mahout, perhaps?"

You nodded, watching the elephant.

Only after your father shoved you up onto the side ladder and you climbed into the carriage did you realize that the mendicants' pain was gone. From the dizzying height, lurching forward, touching the prickly black hairs, you could not feel the world's agonies spread out below you: the farmers on the plate-sized fields, the swimmers in the lake. Nothing. You laughed. You laughed and snuggled into your mother's arms.

You remember that moment as if it happened yesterday. You felt like a god, free of pain. Though that is impossible: the elephant was the god and the mahout its keeper.

> "There was a big ditch at that time put there for the purpose of draining . . . and they'd sent these boys to ride the elephants. They went down to water them and on the way back each boy had a little stick-like that was a spear or hook in the end of it . . . And this big old elephant, Mary, reached over to get her a watermelon rind, about a half a watermelon somebody ate and just laid it down there; 'n she did, the boy Eldridge give her a jerk. He pulled her away from 'em and he just bowed real big; and when he did, she took him right around the waist . . . and throwed him against the side of the drink stand and just knocked the whole side out o' it. I guess it killed him, but when he hit the ground, the elephant just walked over and set her foot on his head . . . and the blood and brains and stuff just squirted all over."
>
> —W.H. Coleman, eyewitness

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Only one woman's face haunts you. You have been with many women, trying to block the pain. It never works; even in the throes of orgasm there is always a larger ache than before.

But you did not know this woman. Not even a name.

Four years ago—almost to the day you sit and eat at Dan's—she came to you as the shadows began to shut down your booth. Exhausted, half in trance, you had peered into the pains of a dozen "customers," lied for the contented ones who hid their disappointments deep.

The woman cleared your thoughts. She had an elegance beyond her simple cotton dress which reminded you of the leper woman as she might have been. Around her, the circus folk melted away. The Scaled Man and the Bearded Lady, the Man With Two Spears Through His Cheeks and the Lady Who Drank Blood: they enhanced her beauty all the more. She smelled of jasmine and treacle. You imagined her skin smooth beneath your touch.

You bowed to her, recited the routine the other performers had taught you, in the despised pidgin English. You speak the language with only a hint of accent.

She listened patiently, gave the drunken crowd gathered at her back a single glance, but did not wave them away. A large crowd, enlivened by an entire day of merry-making. "Is my husband cheating on me?" A harsher voice than you imagined.

She had been biting back her pain and now it flooded out, embraced you. You looked into her eyes (such pretty eyes: long-lashed and black, with no reflection) and winced. The answer was wrapped around her doubts. The lies she had told herself, the imagined explanations for late night forays.

You hesitated, glanced around you at the litter of bottles and cartons, the mud and filth.

"Come on!" It was a plea.

"Yes."

The crowd roared. The circus folk chuckled, quietly mocking: the Scaled Man and the Bearded Lady and the Man With Two Spears and the Lady Who Drank Blood. A low mumble of "Cuckold! Cuckold!" swept through the people. The wide, happy wave of amusement muffled her pain, numbed you.

You smiled. You almost laughed.

The smile left your lips when you looked up at her. You have never seen that expression before or since, the betrayal which bled from her eyes, the perfect mouth.

The woman pulled a knife from her purse. She plunged it into your chest, above the heart. Out it came, trailing red. She raised it to strike again—and on the downward stroke the Man With Two Spears caught

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the blade through his palm, wrenched it from her. The Scaled Man and the Bearded Lady dragged her away, snarling and fighting them.

You stared stupidly at the wound, at the blood smeared across your costume. The crowd had broken down into its thousand parts, some screaming, some backing quietly away, a few calling for a doctor. You just stared. Time, urgency—these things were unimportant.

You daubed your finger in the bright, bright blood. *This is me?* you thought. *I am bleeding?* No pain. Like the leper in Jaipur. No pain. And, for one glorious moment, looking up into the clowns' faces, you believed you were free. But:

The clowns radiated pity. The Lady Who Drank Blood clasped your arm, aching over your wound, licking it. Your face became a mask, then crumbled. You had only become numb to your own pain. Like the old men in the Jaipur market who sucked and sucked on their opium pipes.

You are old now and the elephants have robbed you of your pain.

The cooking of crayfish brings your attention away from the window of Dan's Eatery. You know the sensation of death now (brittle, withering), have experienced it in many forms. Arjun eventually taught you to bear it, to sit still while life slipped away.

The crayfish are lowered into the pot, their chitin turning red, dozens of eyes popping. Tiny slivers. Then: silence. Or an echo. The ghost of another, more distant pain. You cannot tell. Your hand cannot feel the hotness as it clutches a cup of coffee.

You are homesick.

> "The crowd kept hollerin' and sayin', 'Let's kill the elephant, let's kill 'er. . . ."
>
> —Mr. Coleman

> "Sheriff Gallahan thought he could shoot her, but he couldn't with a .45. It just knocked chips out of her hide a little."
>
> —Mr. Treadwell, eyewitness

> " . . . [the owner] said 'People, I'd be perfectly willin' to kill her, but there's no way to kill her. There ain't gun enough in this country that she could be killed; there's no way to kill her.' "
>
> —Mr. Coleman

> "It was decreed that she must be [hung by derrick] in the interests of public safety, by whom I do not know, certainly not by anyone here."
>
> —Mrs. E.H. Griffith, in a letter to Bert Vincent

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Last night you shared the crowded freight compartment with your elephants; the *chump chump* of wheels on the track lulled you to sleep. You were so tired you slept standing up, leaning against Mary, your largest.

You dreamt.

Mary grew until her feet touched the four corners of the earth, so large that you measured less than the height of her toenails. Absurdly, the trinity—Brahma, Siva, Vishnu—whirled above her head on their appointed vehicles. She took you in her trunk, grasping you so gently that the tiniest twitch and you would have fallen to your death. She brought you up, up through the clouds until you were in the cold dark of the cosmos, looking into her eye. It seemed to question you.

You wept. In Hindi, you said, "Please, Ganesh. I am so old. Take away their pain. Give back my own pain. . . ." You wept and Mary stared at you. There was no answer. It was only Mary, not Ganesh at all. The stars whispered in Sanskrit, wrote messages across the dark you could not decipher.

When you woke, you brushed her and fed her cabbage heads, watermelon rinds, cooed softly in her ear when the shivering of box car metal disturbed her.

> "Everybody was excited about it, you know—'n' come down there to watch them hang the elephant. They had a coal tipple down there; I guess the coal tipple was three hundred, four hundred feet long from the ground to the top of the tipple; and it was covered up with people just as thick as they could stand on that tipple, you know, besides what was on the ground. I'd say they 'as three thousand people there. . . ."
>
> —Bud Jones, eyewitness

Your stomach is queasy as you walk out of Dan's Eatery into the humidity of mainstreet Erwin. You stare up at the moon. Tonight, it is Ganesh's tusk, thin and bright through tree branches. A lucky moon.

> "They brought those elephants down there, four or five of them together. And they had this here Mary bringing up the rear. It was just like they was havin' a parade, holdin' one another's tail . . . These other ones come up . . . and they stopped. Well, she just cut loose right there and the showmen, they went and put a chain, a small chain, around her foot, and chained her to the rail. Then they backed the wrecker up to her and throwed the big 7/8 inch chain around her neck and hoisted her, and she got up about, oh, I'll say five or six feet off the ground, and the chain around her neck broke. See, they

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had to pull this chain loose; it broke the smaller chain, and that weakened the other chain. And so, when they got her up about five or six feet from the ground, why it broke. . . ."

—Mont Tilly, railroad crew

". . . And it kind o' addled her when it fell, you know. And we quick 'n' got another chain and put it around her neck then and hooked it before she could get up."

—Bud Jones, fireman on the 100-ton derrick car

You are running out of Erwin the moment the chain first bites into Mary's neck—down the dirt road, into the darkness of trees. The circus is a mile away. *The trains don't even bother passing through Erwin* . . . How will you save her now? Your teeth bite through your lower lip, blood trickling onto your shirt. You feel nothing.

The scene flickers across your mind, brought to you by clowns' eyes: bonfires lick across train tracks, the coal tipple engorged with people, the crowd below noisy and whiskey-slicked. Mary trumpets as she rises. The derrick strains. The other elephants, already packed onto the train, trumpet too, butt their heads against the steel doors. You choke on tears as you run, the air tightening in your throat.

Soon, you can see the fires for yourself, the tops of tipple and derrick, twin towers. Mary trumpets, *mahout!*

The derrick (in the clowns' eyes) trembles, chain breaking, and Mary falls with a soft *thud* onto the grass, onto her lungs. You cry out, fall with her, tumble, and lie sprawled on the ground. Blind, images superimposed over your sight, you scramble to your feet.

The chain is brought twice around Mary's neck. You cannot breathe. A branch whips across your face, stings, but you see only Mary's shadow, lit by fires, rising again into the air. You choke on the crowd's fascination as they watch. The hooker and the man from the bar are both there, forgetting their own pain. *Tease, you tease too much.* You cannot go home to a dog which may be dead. . . .

Mary against the fire sky, against the tusk of moon.

Now you sprint, sure you will die of the exertion, but not caring. You can smell the smoke, hear the crowd for yourself. So close. So close.

Mary jerks and you jerk, brought up short. Blood trickles from both your mouths. "Ere—look at the beast!" The crowd laughs. Clowns sob. The Bearded Lady rips out her hair. Mary's struggles weaken. Your legs dangle.

For a moment, a moment in which time has no meaning, you gaze out from Mary's eyes as you gently swing, look down upon the crowd, the dancing fires, across the tipple and its human cargo.

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Hoopoe birds cry, fly to buzz of mosquito; juicy leaves; muddy waterholes; a lazy trunk across the backs of other elephants; shadows of elephants at twilight, under the Sanskrit sky . . . Danger—orange danger; fangs and tusks. Tiger.

You cry out, convulse at the moment of death, the reluctant *crack* of the neck, and as Mary's eyes roll back into her head, so do yours. Your neck snaps to the side and you fall, hands clenched so tightly a knuckle pops. Your nerve ends are on fire. Everything around you shrieks with pain: every blade of grass, every tree.

The pain is an elephant eye—coronaed in amber. *Ganesh.* Then you lose yourself in the reflectionless black.

> "She kicked a bit and that was all; see, that thing choked her to death right quick."
>
> —Sam Harvey, train engineer

1857. The smell of attar, the humid, moist taste of death surrounded Jaipur. A bad year for you when you could not be near elephants. You had nightmares. The Sepoy Revolt, starting outside Makut, spread until even the maharajahs seized at chances for autonomy.

One summer day you glanced up from the lake below the Amber Palace and saw elephants trudging across the ridge, fitted out in full battle dress. Arjun, your teacher now, rode the lead elephant, and he too was dressed for war.

Your parents had told you the plans the night before, but you hadn't believed them. A show of strength, your father said. They would not fight, only bring luck to the maharajah. Your mother frowned, shook her head. Regardless, to send elephants against the British was madness. How could elephants match rifles and cannon?

You watched for a long time, while trumpets sounded and peacocks gave their mating calls. To the west: smoke and vultures. The battle. All day, after the elephants had faded from sight, you watched the trail of smoke, the circling vultures. So many vultures. So much smoke. Sometimes you imagined you heard cannon recoil, a tremor beneath your feet.

The lake waters turned a darker and darker blue, shadows long and distorted. You fell asleep. When you woke, the smoke was closer, the vultures identifiable by species. Along the ridge, the sun's rays driving into their backs like spikes: the mahouts and their elephants. Some mahouts upon litters, bodies stretched out, others slumped across their elephants. You counted. Thirty elephants had gone out. Twenty had returned. You could hear their moans, could feel their pain, even from the lake. Your heartbeat quickened. Disaster. . . .

You ran up the road to the Amber Palace, breathless. Through the

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quiet courtyard, the gardens, to the stables, there to meet a tired, wounded Arjun, death reflected in his eyes. He reeked of smoke and gunpowder, had burns on his face and arms. All around, elephants screamed, some with shrapnel wouunds, veins laid open; others on their knees, their mahouts pleading with them to get up.

Your mouth dropped. Not real. A nightmare. Where was Arjun's elephant?

"Lakshmi, master?" Your voice shook.

For the first time, Arjun was an old man to you, back bent, movements slow.

"Lakshmi is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes! Please. Go away."

And you left, too shocked to cry.

Ganesh dead? How could a god be dead?

> "We did not sit in judgement on her fate and I don't believe any of those who witnessed the event felt it was inhumane under the circumstances. She paid for her crimes as anyone else would."
>
> —Mrs. Griffith, eyewitness

Blood drips onto the grass; the Lady Who Drank Blood laps at the widening pool. They have hoisted Mary upside down from the derrick. Her head hangs three feet from the ground, shadow small in the early morning light.

You crouch beside her, the clowns behind you. Mary's eye is open again, the wrinkles and long lashes and the reflectionless black. You wave the flies away. You are crying. You cannot help yourself. Your throat aches. *Ganesh*. . . . You touch the bristly hair, the rough skin. Cold. Much too cold.

You will not work the booth today. Or ever again. The clowns weep but you feel nothing. Just your own grief. Just the chill wind blowing through you, and you so light and heavy at the same time. Burnt out. Now what will you do? *Take away their pain,* you said.

But, like your old mahout, you know you will never be whole again. ●

[Quotes adapted from Tom Burton's article in the *Tennessee Folklore Bulletin,* Vol. XXXVII, March 1971; used by permission]

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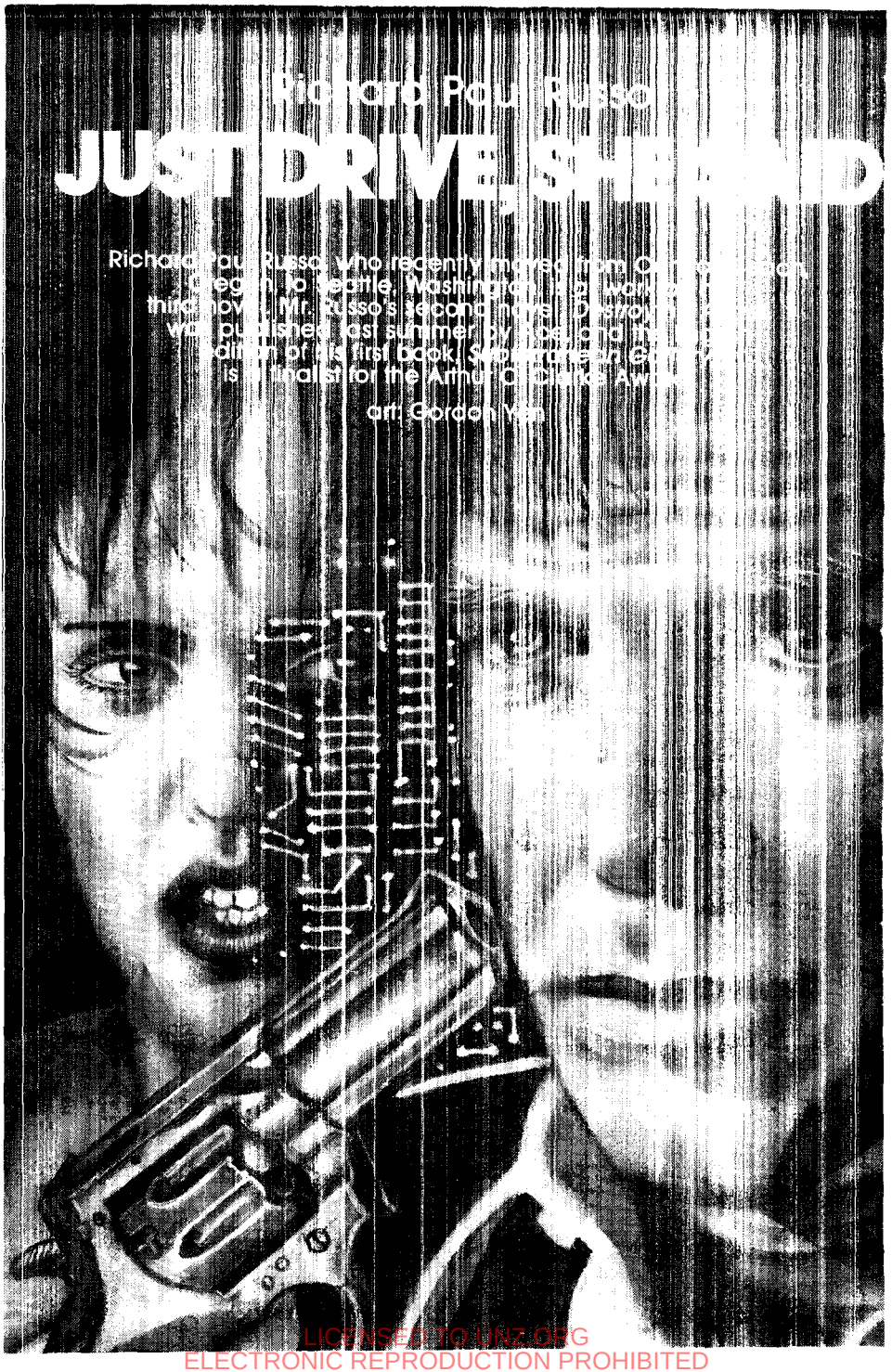
Richard Paul Russo
JUST DRIVE STUPID
Richard Paul Russo, who recently immigrated from Chicago to Seattle, Washington, is working on his third novel. Mr. Russo's second novel, Dark Stories, was published last summer by Dell. Just Drive Stupid is the finalist for the Arthur C. Clarke Award.
art: Gordon Van

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Night.

Ahead of us, the road ended at a washed-out bridge, but we were driving for it at eighty-five miles an hour. Moonlight lit the barricades, the ruins of the bridge dangling over muddy water below.

"Jesus!" I said, trying to look at her. She pressed the gun harder into my temple.

"Just drive," she said.

I drove.

It wasn't even my car.

It was my sister's, an ugly-brown Mazda RX-7 that drove fast and smooth. I'd borrowed it for a few days, and Friday night I drove to a nearby liquor store to pick up some wine—something to get me through another empty weekend.

I was inside for fifteen or twenty minutes. With three bottles of wine, I walked back to the car. I unlocked the door, opened it, and the overhead light went on.

There was a woman in the passenger seat pointing a gun at me. She didn't move, silent and intense, and I thought she was trying to decide whether or not to shoot me.

"Get inside and close the door," she finally said.

I wasn't going to do anything stupid. I got in, closed the door, and the light went off.

The woman took the wine from me with one hand, and with the other jabbed the gun into my ribs.

"Start the engine," she said.

As I did, strange lights went on in the middle of the dash. The tape deck was gone, replaced by a larger, glistening piece of electronics with dozens of buttons, dials, and readouts. Amber and green lights flickered across the thing, the displays showing figures that were probably letters or numbers, though nothing I recognized.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"A probability wave console. Generator, tuner, and amplifier."

Jesus, hijacked by a lunatic.

She jabbed me again with the gun, and said, "Let's go."

"This isn't my car," I told her.

"You think I give a shit?"

No, guess not. "My sister's waiting for me," I said, without much hope.

"Want me to repeat what I just said?"

I shook my head. "Where to?"

"Just go right and drive a while," she said.

The gun was still in my ribs, so I did what she asked.

Her hair was short and dark, and she was wearing blue jeans, a gray

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sweatshirt, and dark boots. Slim, but strong-looking. She didn't look crazy, I thought, but then what did crazy look like?'

As I drove along, she fiddled with the console, and a stream of figures moved across the largest display. She glanced up, nodded toward a wrecked Toyota ahead of us on the side of the road, and said, "That used to be my car." We passed the wreck, and she returned her attention to the console.

A blue light began to blink frantically on the side of it.

"Goddamn it," the woman said. "How the hell did she find me so soon?" She pushed another button and a small screen emerged from the top of the console. A glowing map appeared on the screen, with two different blinking lights a few inches apart.

"Turn right at the next corner," she said, "and hit the gas. Move this crate."

I turned and accelerated. Traffic was light, but I still had to pay attention to other cars.

"Faster," the woman said.

"What about the police?" I asked. Which was a stupid question. I *wanted* the police.

"Fuck 'em," she said. "Just move it."

So I stepped on the gas. I was weaving in and out of traffic now, getting nervous. But whenever I started to slow down she jabbed the gun into my ribs and said, "Keep moving."

She had me make a series of turns, wheels squealing with each one, then we were on a long, open road with hardly any traffic. I was pretty sure the river was ahead of us somewhere.

"Now floor it," she said. I hesitated, and she moved the gun from my ribs to my head. "Floor it, goddamn you!"

I floored it.

Which was how, a few moments later, we were headed straight for barricades and a ruined bridge at eighty-five miles an hour.

I should have hit the brakes. What was she going to do, shoot me? But I kept my foot on the gas, the steering wheel straight.

The woman punched a few more buttons. Green lights flashed, bright patterned circles. Just before we reached the barricades, she jammed a switch on the front of the console.

Everything lurched sideways. At least, that's how it felt, lurched so hard I felt sick. But we were still on the road, still moving straight ahead at eighty-five. Except now the barricades were gone, and stretching out ahead of us, spanning the river and glistening with bright lights, was a whole, undamaged bridge.

We shot across it over the river, came down on the other side, and kept

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going. I braked through a long, sweeping turn, barely keeping the car on the road, then we were driving along the river road.

I couldn't see much in the dark. It wasn't a part of the city I knew well, but I had been through it a few times, and something seemed out of place.

"Just keep going," the woman said. She was watching a display on the console, a rolling series of figures that made me think of a time counter.

I drove along the river road, trying to figure out what seemed different, but unable to pinpoint anything. About fifteen minutes after we'd crossed the bridge, the console display stopped changing, and flashed a single figure.

"All right," the woman said. "Bring the speed back up."

The gun was gone from my head, but I wasn't about to argue. I accelerated until we were back up near eighty. The woman pushed buttons, then again jammed the big switch on the front of the console.

We lurched sideways without moving again, and this time I thought I was really going to be sick. Everything in my vision began to tilt, and I had a hell of a time keeping the car on the road. I hit the brakes and brought the car to a stop, no longer caring what she would do to me.

I left the engine running, put my head on the steering wheel, and breathed slowly, deeply, until the spinning stopped. I straightened and looked at the woman. She now held the gun in her lap.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Terrific."

"We won't have to go so hard now," she said. "Just coast along at twenty, twenty-five miles an hour."

"Does that mean I start driving again?"

She nodded.

I looked down at the gun in her lap, and nodded back. "Give me another minute or two, will you?" I held up my hand, which was shaking. "I can't drive like this."

"All right."

I sat there, trying to relax, trying to cut down the shakes. The street was nearly deserted; only a few cars drove by, and there were no pedestrians. The cars looked odd, but there wasn't enough light for me to figure out why. Then I leaned forward over the steering wheel and looked at the front of the Mazda. It was still an ugly brown, but the nose had become more elongated, sharper. The rectractable headlights were gone, replaced by conventional stationary lights.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"If it was daylight, you'd see even stranger things," she said.

Which made me look more closely at our surroundings. The nearby streetlight was mounted on an unusually thick metal pole, and gave off

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a sharp, emerald glow I'd never seen before. The lights in the buildings were brighter, harsher than I would have expected.

"Let's go," the woman said.

I breathed deeply a few more times. Then I put the car into gear, let out the clutch, and swung back onto the road.

We drove slowly, and I kept searching for changes in my surroundings, but it was too dark to see much. The woman directed me through several turns, then onto a freeway.

On the freeway there *were* differences I could identify. The overhead signs were blue rather than green, lit from below by rose-tinted lights. And the street and city names were completely unfamiliar—definitely not English. I didn't think I could pronounce half of them.

"You going to tell me what the *hell* is happening here?"

"Just look for a motel," she said.

"And how am I supposed to recognize one?"

She smiled. "Spelled just the same here as where you're from. It's practically a trans-universal word."

We drove on, and I wanted something to break the silence, to ground me. "Will that thing play music?"

The woman just laughed and shook her head, and I wondered what was so funny.

She was right, though, about a motel. From a mile away I saw a bright glowing sign:

MOTEL

As we got closer, I could make out other words, but none of them made sense. There were numbers as well, but there were too many digits, and a strange hooked symbol instead of a dollar sign.

"Hope you can pay for this," I said. "My money's not going to be much good here."

She smiled. "You'd be surprised."

I pulled off the freeway, drove into the motel parking lot, and the woman pointed out the office at the end of the building. She made me go in with her. At the desk, she talked to a crusty old man who wore a black helmet, face covered by a smoky visor. What they spoke sounded like a mix of foreign languages—a few words close to English, others like German, a few like French.

The woman paid with large, brightly colored bills, and the man gave her a narrow cylinder that hung by a chain from a plastic ball. We walked back to the car in silence, then she directed me to drive around the back of the building, where we parked in front of a tan door. The woman handed the wine bottles to me, took two duffel bags out from behind the seats, then made sure I locked up the car. She inserted the

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cylinder into a narrow opening where it hummed, then clicked; the door swung open, and we stepped inside.

There was a table with two padded chairs, a television set, a radio, and a double bed. The woman set the duffel bags on the floor, and I put the wine bottles on the table; the labels had changed, and were now unreadable. I looked at her.

"There's only one bed."

"We'll manage," she said. "Let's go get something to eat, I'm hungry."

We went to a coffee shop next to the motel, where the woman ordered for both of us. I ended up with something that looked and tasted a lot like a Denny's chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes.

After we ate, the woman said she needed a drink. I figured I could use one too, so we went to the attached lounge and sat at a table in the back corner, empty tables all around us. She asked me what I liked to drink, and I told her scotch. She ordered from the waiter, and when my drink came it did taste an awful lot like scotch—cheap scotch, but scotch nevertheless. The woman was drinking something clear over ice.

"A trans-universal," the woman said. "Alcohol, coffee, and tobacco. Hotels and motels are close, along with guns and cars, but alcohol, coffee, and tobacco are almost everywhere."

Right. We drank. One drink, two drinks. Then a third. I was feeling it. We didn't talk, but we had another drink. I didn't know about her, but I was getting smashed.

"What's your name?" I asked. Drunk, I was feeling reckless, and it seemed like a reckless question.

"It would sound like garbage." She paused. "Call me Victoria." Another pause. "What's *your* name?"

"Robert."

"Robert." She nodded. "Robert, do you have any idea what's been happening to you?"

I shook my head.

"Of course not. Ever heard of parallel universes?"

"Sure. As an idea, not something that actually exists."

"They exist. We've been moving from one to another." She signaled for two more drinks, then looked at me for a minute before going on. "The console in the car? It generates probability waves that slip us from one universe to another."

The drinks came, and she drank half of hers immediately. It was a crazy idea, but how *else* had I come to this place? We sat for a while in silence, drinking. Actually, I kind of *liked* the idea of traveling between universes. It beat hell out of sitting alone in an empty apartment all weekend.

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"Wait a second," I said. "How the hell do you know how to speak from one place to another? You can't *know* all these languages."

She shook her head. "I don't." She tapped at the base of her skull. "But *this* does. Batch of microchips planted in my head." Then she stretched out her arms. "Robert, I'm wired. I've got a built-in receiver running through my whole body. Every time I shift universes, my body pulls in all the radio and television signals, whatever's out there, and the batch in my head does the rest. In ten or fifteen minutes, I've got enough of the language to get by. That's how I picked up your slang. And each time I shift places, I shift languages. Or I can lock onto one, like I have with yours." She paused. "I like being able to talk to you."

I looked at her for a minute.

"Why? Why are you traveling between universes? And who the hell is after you?"

She didn't answer. She returned my gaze for a while, stood, then said, "Let's get back to the room."

Without thinking, I opened my wallet to leave a tip. My paper money had changed from green to the brightly colored bills I'd seen Victoria use.

"Just like the car," Victoria said. "Anything that's not alive." She took two small bills from my wallet, left them on the table.

I felt a lot drunker as we walked back to the motel. Or maybe it was just overload. I felt I was moving through water. Or mud. It seemed like a long trip across the parking lot, but we finally reached our room and went inside.

I dropped into one of the chairs. Victoria sat on the bed with her back against the wall. Someone in the room above us kept dropping things onto the floor.

"When I first opened the car door and saw you," I said, "it looked like you were trying to decide whether or not to shoot me."

Victoria shook her head slightly and smiled. "I would never have shot you."

"Maybe you shouldn't tell me that. Maybe I'll just take off."

"Yeah? Where the hell are you going to go?"

I shrugged.

"No," she said. "I was trying to decide whether or not to take you with me."

"Why did you? Hostage?"

She shook her head again, the smile gone. "I've been lonely," she said. "I just wanted the company."

I didn't say anything. She pushed up from the bed. "I'm going to take a shower." She turned away from me and walked into the bathroom, closed the door.

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Find the gun, I thought. But only for a moment. I didn't really care where the gun was, I didn't want to have anything to do with it. What I did instead was undress and get into bed. I was beat, still half drunk, and I needed the sleep.

But I *couldn't* sleep. I lay wide awake, waiting for her to return. It had been a long time since I'd been involved with anyone, and that had been a woman who spent all her time on speed of one kind or another; I'd begun to feel like I was moving in slow motion whenever I was with her. Now I felt as if *I* had been on speed most of the evening. I closed my eyes, but that didn't help. I waited.

I opened my eyes to the covers being pulled away, and Victoria standing over me, naked and wet from the shower. She was a completely normal woman, whatever universe she'd come from.

She crawled across the bed on all fours, dripping onto my skin as she leaned over me. She blew air across my belly, through the hair between my legs. She moved down toward my thighs, and straddled me.

"I'm too drunk," I said.

She looked down at my crotch. "No you're not," she said.

"I'm too tired."

"No you're not."

"I don't even know what you are," I said.

"What do you think I am?" She moved forward, lifted slightly, then slowly lowered herself onto me, warm and moist. She smiled. "Just drive," she said.

I drove.

She wouldn't talk about where we were going, or why. I had the feeling she didn't have any particular destination in mind, that she was just shifting from one universe to another at random, trying to lose her pursuer. For a few days, it seemed to work.

I got used to the changes. Or rather, to the *idea* of change. Each day we made at least one shift, usually two. Once we made three, which was a mistake—I got sick all over the front seat and nearly ran the car into a concrete channel on the side of the road used by people on cable-powered skateboards. After that, we shared the driving, and stuck to two shifts a day.

Everything changed—the car, our clothes, money. Language changed, occasionally becoming so close to English that I could understand it again, but usually becoming completely unintelligible. And the world around us changed.

Once we emerged into a domed city, buildings reaching to the dome itself and through it, jutting into the open sky above. Another city was a maze of narrow roadways with hundreds of footbridges above the streets,

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connecting the stone buildings in a vast, chaotic network of bent and twisted metal. And once we came out onto a cracked and potholed concrete road in the middle of a dry, gutted wasteland, flat ruins for miles in all directions, no signs at all of life. We shifted out of there as soon as we could.

We spent several hours a day on the road. Sometimes we shifted at lower speeds, which was easier on me, but which, she said, made for smaller jumps that were easier to track. And though she could make a second shift as soon as fifteen or twenty minutes after the first, Victoria liked to put as much actual distance between shifts as possible. Left a tougher trail to follow, she said.

We spent much of the time driving in silence, but we did talk a little. I talked about my own world, my universe, my life—which wasn't much. I was in charge of the Documents Department of a large corporate law firm. I liked the job itself, but working for asshole attorneys all day long had become almost unbearable. And my personal life was hardly fulfilling. But I talked about it all, and once in a while Victoria would talk about what it was like traveling between universes.

"Do you ever stop running?" I asked once. "I mean, how long can you keep it up? Don't you ever get a chance to just stop for a while?"

Victoria nodded. "When I've made enough shifts over a long period of time, it gives me distance. I get a few days, a couple of weeks. I'll just stay in one place for a while, relax, or maybe do something to pick up some money. But eventually I have to leave, start shifting again."

"You can't lose them?"

She shook her head and tapped the console. "These damn things leave a trail in the wake of the probability waves. Make enough shifts and you can make the trail faint, but a good hunter will always be able to pick it up eventually."

Hunter. And I was traveling with the hunted.

Victoria did talk about bringing me back to my own universe. First couple of times she mentioned it I didn't say anything. I was thinking about it. But I liked the idea of staying with her.

"I don't want to go back," I finally said to her.

It was dusk. Victoria was driving through the outskirts of a haze-filled city, blue flashes of light bursting silently and sporadically high above us. The streets were nearly deserted.

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about," she said. "You can't just stick around for a while and then change your mind, get a plane flight home."

"I realize that."

"You realize shit." She turned onto a busier street. Lights were coming

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on in buildings, and the blue flashes were increasing in frequency. "Just look for a god damn motel, all right?"

Neither of us said anything for a while. The street seemed to be headed for the city center, and it got busier and more crowded, brighter and louder. A couple of miles along, Victoria pulled into the parking lot of a run-down motel set back in the concrete pilings of an overpass. She drove into a slot, switched off the engine, and turned to me.

"Look," she said. "The further we get away from your universe, the harder it'll be to get back. We get far enough away, it'll be impossible. You'll be stuck out here somewhere, no way back. And traveling with me isn't the safest thing you can do. I've had people hunting me for two years. Some day they're going to catch up with me. You aren't going to want to be around when they do." She paused. "I've been on my own for years, and that's the way I want it. I like your company, but I'm not about to make this permanent. You're holding me up, for Christ's sake. You can't handle more than two shifts a day. On my own, I can do five or six before it hits me that hard." She paused again. "You understand what I'm saying?"

"I'll get used to it," I said.

"Not soon enough for me."

"I don't want to go back."

"Christ." She turned away from me, opened the door, and went to check in.

Three more days. Traveling, shifting, no resolution, no final decision. Then, one morning, driving slowly through the heart of a city, we shifted, and dropped into the middle of a war.

We went from bright afternoon sunshine to gray skies darkened by clouds of ash. From laughter and shouts and purring traffic to screams and sirens and gunfire. From busy but orderly streets filled with calm pedestrians and cyclists to chaos, people running from shelter to shelter, and vehicles burning on the roads.

I saw the crater in front of us just in time, swerved, and jolted up a curb, knocking over a metal canister that spilled fuming liquid across the sidewalk. I got the car back on the road, but half a block ahead of us was a barricade manned by armed soldiers. Huge guns were aimed directly at us.

I hit the brakes and made a half-accidental U-turn, downshifted and punched the gas. Gunshots exploded, something hit the car, but we were still going.

"Shift us the hell out of here!" I screamed at her.

"I can't, you fucking moron! It's too damn soon!"

I turned down the first side street, nearly losing control of the car,

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then, seeing more barricades up ahead, swung into an alley that dead-ended in a heap of trash.

Victoria was out of the car before it stopped, shoving aside the trash—blocks of styrofoam, huge wads of paper, and other lightweight bundles. I drove the car into the opening she'd made, half burying the car in the mound. I got out, locked the doors, and helped her finish hiding the car with the foam blocks and wadded paper.

No one seemed to have followed us. I wondered if we should have just stayed in the car, but Victoria was already crawling through a broken window into one of the buildings lining the alley. I followed her inside.

The building was dark, and nearly silent; the only sounds came from outside, muffled by the brick walls. There was enough light coming in through the grimy, cracked windows for us to make our way. I followed Victoria through jumbles of complex machinery.

"Where are we going?" I whispered.

"I want to get above ground level. I'll feel safer. Then we can find a window where we can keep an eye on the car."

She found a stairway, and we went up. The doorway to the second floor was scarred and warped, the door blown off its hinges. We went through it, and came out in a maze of clear-walled cubicles filled with cracked glass cylinders.

We made our way through the maze, the floor covered with huge chunks of broken glass and twisted coils of wire. Every step made loud crunching sounds. Eventually we reached a window looking down on the alley, only to see half a dozen people dressed in fatigues and carrying weapons. At first I thought they were searching the alley, but it soon became clear that they were actually making camp for the night. The car looked to be safe, but we had no way to get to it.

The soldiers erected a structure that was half tent, half lean-to against the brick building across the way, and started a fire inside a squat metal cylinder.

We watched the soldiers and the fire for a while, but it was obvious they weren't going to leave, so we set up for the night ourselves. We cleared a space to sleep in, scrounged some scraps of cloth and some torn cushions to make a bed. Then we tried to sleep.

I didn't sleep much. Sporadic gunfire sounded throughout the night, and bursts of bright color regularly lit up the window, reflecting shards of light from the broken glass and the cubicle walls.

I was glad when dawn came. The sky outside was overcast, a gradually brightening gray. I went to the window. Below, the soldiers were breaking camp. One of them extinguished the cylinder fire while the others broke down the lean-to and packed it away.

"It looks like they're leaving," I said.

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Victoria joined me at the window. We watched the soldiers pack, and about a half hour later they gathered together, talked for a few minutes, then marched half-heartedly out of the alley. They turned left onto the main street, and were soon gone from sight.

"Let's wait a while," Victoria said. "Make sure they don't come back for anything."

The soldiers didn't come back, but a few minutes later a woman appeared at the mouth of the alley. She was quite tall, with long, light hair tied into a double tail, and wearing a dark green, form-fitting coverall. She hesitated, looking down the alley, glancing in all directions.

"Jesus H. Christ," Victoria said, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

I realized then that this had to be her pursuer.

The woman started into the alley, walking slowly, looking up and down the walls of the buildings.

"What happens if she finds the car?"

"She'll find it," Victoria said.

The woman was two thirds of the way down the alley, almost directly beneath us, when a shout brought her to a halt. She turned. At the mouth of the alley was a group of soldiers; maybe the same group that had camped overnight.

One of the soldiers called out something, and the woman responded. I couldn't make out what they were saying, it wasn't loud enough, but I wouldn't have understood a word anyway. Victoria just shrugged when I asked her.

The woman took a few steps toward the soldiers, then stopped. The soldiers came into the alley, marched down it, and surrounded her. She gestured at the street, then at one of the buildings. I could see her smiling. One of the soldiers jabbed at her shoulder. The woman kept smiling. Another soldier shrugged, pointed up at the sky.

Suddenly one of the soldiers raised a handgun, put it against the woman's temple, and fired.

The woman's head jerked—*I* jerked—and she crumpled to the ground, blood running onto the gravel and pavement. Victoria made a sharp, quiet sound and gripped my arm. My own hands gripped the windowsill, nails digging into wood.

The soldiers didn't touch the woman. They looked down at her, but they didn't search her, didn't move her, nothing. They stood around for a few minutes, smoking cigarettes, then walked out of the alley.

Victoria and I stood at the window in silence, looking down at the woman's body, the dark spreading pool of blood.

"Did you want her dead?" I finally asked. Hoping the answer would be no.

Victoria shook her head.

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"Would you have killed her if she'd caught up to you?"

Again she shook her head. She was pale, the first time I'd ever seen her when she didn't seem completely self-assured. I didn't feel too good myself.

"That's it," she said eventually. "You're going back."

I didn't say a word. I still didn't plan to go back, but I didn't think it was the time to argue.

We waited a long time. Two hours, maybe three. The soldiers never returned. The dead woman lay undisturbed, her feet in the shafts of sunlight that broke through the clouds and the jagged building roofs.

Eventually we went downstairs and crawled back out through the broken window. We crossed the alley to the dead woman. Victoria knelt beside her, went through the coverall pockets and removed a block of keys and a wad of money. She murmured a few words in a language I'd never heard, touched the woman on her chest, shoulders, and throat, then gently closed the woman's eyes. She stood.

"Let's go," she said. "You drive."

We dug out the car, got in. I started the engine and backed slowly down the alley while Victoria played around with the console.

"That way." She pointed down the street as we emerged from the alley. "Go slow."

The street was a mess, but now there were people out on the sidewalks who didn't look like soldiers, and a few other vehicles drove slowly in either direction. We'd gone a couple of blocks when Victoria pointed to a driveway leading through a hedge. I pulled into the driveway, drove through the opening in the hedge, and stopped just behind another car.

"Get this thing turned around so we can pull out in a hurry if we have to."

I did, and left the engine idling.

"Wait here." Victoria got out, walked up to the other car, produced the block of keys she'd taken from the dead woman, and opened the front door. She ducked inside, seemed to do something at the dashboard—another console, I figured.

While she was in the other car, I dug through her bags until I found the gun. I checked to make sure I could work the damn thing, then tucked it between my seat and the door.

Victoria left the other car, walked back, and got in beside me. She didn't say anything at first. Instead, she did things with the Mazda's console, working intently for several minutes. Finally she finished and turned to me.

"You're going back," she said. "I am *not* going to be responsible for you being killed."

"No . . ." I started, but she cut me off, sharp and quick.

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"No, nothing," she said. "This isn't the end of it. There'll be someone else after me before long." She paused. "You're going back. I've programmed this thing to make all the shifts, reverse the route we took here."

"It'll take me back?" I asked. "To *my* universe?"

"Close enough so you won't know the difference. Two shifts a day until you're home." She gave me a wad of money. "This should be plenty to get you back. Pretend to be deaf and dumb and illiterate, for Christ's sake, and you'll probably be fine."

"What about you?"

"I'll be taking that," she said, pointing to the car in front of us. "The console in it looks to be working just fine." She turned back to me. "You pull out, and get up to speed as fast as you can. It'll make the first shift as soon as you hit thirty."

"I'd just as soon stay with you," I said.

She got out of the car without answering, shut the door, and came around to the driver's side. I rolled down the window.

"I mean it," I said.

She sighed. "You want me to threaten you with the gun again?"

I gave her a half smile. She leaned through the window and kissed me. Then she pulled back, stepped away from the car. "Go," she said.

I nodded. I put the car in reverse and backed up a few feet. Victoria walked over to the other car, and I stopped. I took the gun, picked what looked to be the most vulnerable spot of the console, and jammed the gun barrel against it. I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger.

I got off six or seven shots, metal flying everywhere, before Victoria grabbed my arm. She screamed something at me that sounded a lot like, "Asshole!"

I opened my eyes. The console was a mess. I looked at Victoria, who stared at me through the open window. I held out the gun, and she took it.

"You're fucking crazy," she said.

I got out of the car, stood beside her. "Want me to drive?"

She didn't answer. We walked to the other car, and I got in behind the wheel, Victoria beside me. I started the engine, put it in gear, and backed around the Mazda. I shifted gears, moved through the hedge, then stopped at the edge of the street. I looked at Victoria, who was shaking her head, but smiling now.

"Do I have to say it?" she asked.

I shook my head. I let out the clutch, swung the car out onto the street, and drove. ●

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THE STONE DRUM

Charles de Lint

Charles de Lint is a full-time writer and part-time musician who lives in Ottawa, Ontario, with his wife MaryAnn Harris, a textile artist. His work combines elements of the thriller, the cultures of indigenous peoples, and fantasy in mostly contemporary settings. His published novels include *Moonheart* and the award-winning *Jack the Giant-Killer.* Two of his most recent books are *Ghostwood* (Axolotl Press, 1990) and *The Little Country* (Avon, 1991).

art: Bob Walters

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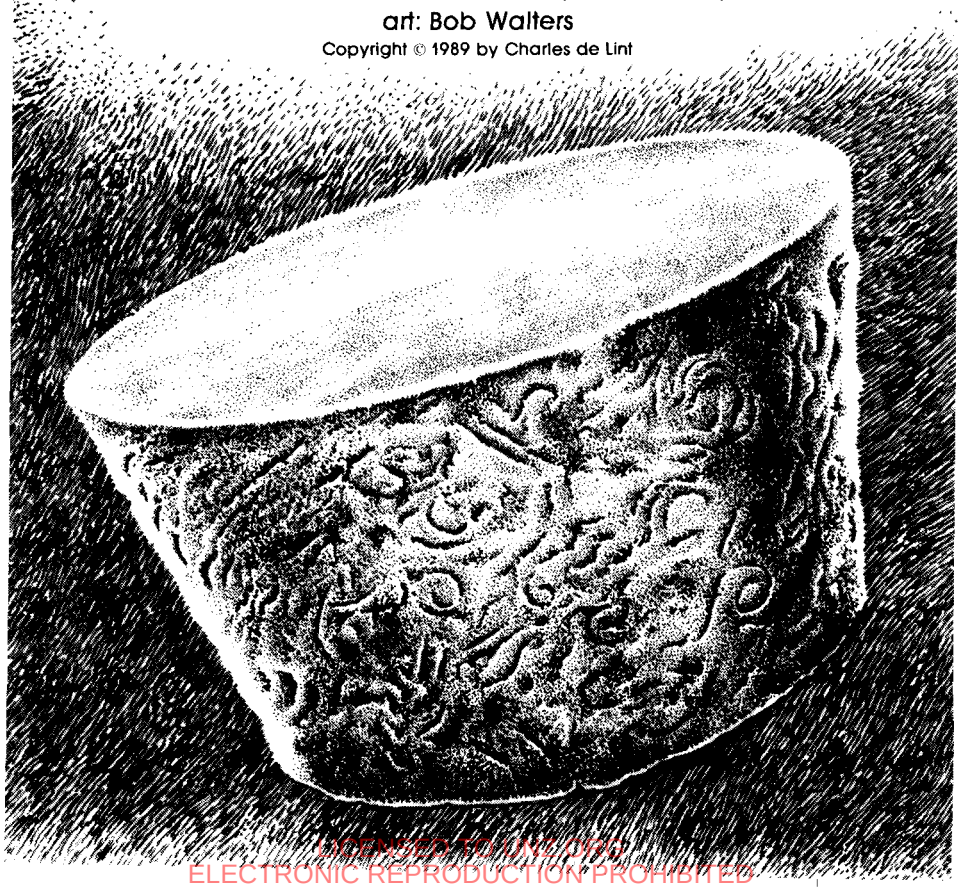

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There is no question that there
is an unseen world. The problem
is how far is it from midtown and
how late is it open?
—attributed to Woody Allen

It was Jilly Coppercorn who found the stone drum, late one afternoon.

She brought it around to Professor Dapple's rambling Tudor-styled house in the old quarter of Lower Crowsea that same evening, wrapped up in folds of brown paper and tied with twine. She rapped sharply on the professor's door with the little brass lion's head knocker that always seemed to stare too intently at her, then stepped back as Olaf Goonasekara, Dapple's odd little housekeeper, flung the door open and glowered out at where she stood on the rickety porch.

"You," he grumbled.

"Me," she agreed, amicably. "Is Bramley in?"

"I'll see," he replied and shut the door.

Jilly sighed and sat down on one of the two worn rattan chairs that stood to the left of the door, her package bundled on her knee. A black-and-orange cat regarded her incuriously from the seat of the other chair, then turned to watch the progress of a woman walking her dachshund down the street.

Professor Dapple still taught a few classes at Butler U., but he wasn't nearly as involved with the curriculum as he had been when Jilly attended the university. There'd been some kind of a scandal—something about a Bishop, some old coins and the daughter of a Tarot reader—but Jilly had never quite got the story straight. The professor was a jolly fellow—wizened like an old apple, but more active than many who were only half his apparent sixty years of age. He could talk and joke all night, incessantly polishing his wire-rimmed spectacles for which he didn't even have a prescription.

What he was doing with someone like Olaf Goonasekara as a housekeeper Jilly didn't know. It was true that Goon looked comical enough, what with his protruding stomach and puffed cheeks, the halo of unruly hair and his thin little arms and legs, reminding her of nothing so much as a pumpkin with twig limbs, or a monkey. His usual striped trousers, organ grinder's jacket and the little green and yellow cap he liked to wear, didn't help. Nor did the fact that he was barely four feet tall and that the Professor claimed he was a goblin and just called him Goon.

It didn't seem to allow Goon much dignity, and Jilly would have understood his grumpiness, if she didn't know that he himself insisted on being called Goon and his wardrobe was entirely of his own choosing. Bramley hated Goon's sense of fashion—or rather, his lack thereof.

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The door was flung open again and Jilly stood up to find Goon glowering at her once more.

"He's in," he said.

Jilly smiled. As if he'd actually had to go in and check.

They both stood there, Jilly on the porch and he in the doorway, until Jilly finally asked, "Can he see me?"

Giving an exaggerated sigh, Goon stepped aside to let her in.

"I suppose you'll want something to drink?" he asked as he followed her to the door of the Professor's study.

"Tea would be lovely."

"Hrumph."

Jilly watched him stalk off, then tapped a knuckle on the study's door and stepped into the room. Bramley lifted his gaze from a desk littered with tottering stacks of books and papers and grinned at her from between a gap in the towers of paper.

"I've been doing some research since you called," he said. He poked a finger at a book that Jilly couldn't see, then began to clean his glasses. "Fascinating stuff."

"And hello to you, too," Jilly said.

"Yes, of course. Did you know that the Kickaha had legends of a little people long before the Europeans ever settled this area?"

Jilly could never quite get used to Bramley's habit of starting conversations in the middle. She removed some magazines from a club chair and perched on the edge of its seat, her package clutched to her chest.

"What's that got to do with anything?" she asked.

Bramley looked surprised. "Why, everything. We *are* still looking into the origins of this artifact of yours, aren't we?"

Jilly nodded. From her new position of vantage she could make out the book he'd been reading. *Underhill and Deeper Still*, a short story collection by Christy Riddell. Riddell made a living of retelling the odd stories that lie just under the skin of any large city. This particular one was a collection of urban legends of Old City and other subterranean fancies—not exactly the factual reference source she'd been hoping for.

Old City was real enough; that was where she'd found the drum this afternoon. But as for the rest of it—albino crocodile subway conductors, schools of dog-sized intelligent goldfish in the sewers, mutant rat debating societies and the like. . . .

Old City was the original heart of Newford. It lay deep underneath the subway tunnels—dropped there in the late eighteen hundreds during the Great Quake. The present city, including its sewers and underground transportation tunnels, had been built above the ruins of the old one. There'd been talk in the early seventies of renovating the ruins as a tourist attraction—as had been done in Seattle—but Old City lay too far

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underground for easy access. After numerous studies on the project, the city council had decided that it simply wouldn't be cost efficient.

With that decision. Old City had rapidly gone from a potential tourist attraction to a home for skells—winos, bag ladies, and the other homeless. Not to mention, if one was to believe Bramley and Riddell, bands of ill-mannered goblin-like creatures that Riddell called skookin—a word he'd stolen from old Scots which meant, variously, ugly, furtive, and sullen.

Which, Jilly realized once when she thought about it, made it entirely appropriate that Bramley should claim Goon was related to them.

"You're not going to tell me it's a skookin artifact, are you?" she asked Bramley now.

"Too soon to say," he replied. He nodded at her parcel. "Can I see it?"

Jilly got up and brought it over to the desk, where Bramley made a great show of cutting the twine and unwrapping the paper. Jilly couldn't decide if he was pretending it was the unveiling of a new piece at the museum or his birthday. But then the drum was sitting on the desk, the mica and quartz veins in its stone catching the light from Bramley's desk lamp in a magical glitter, and she was swallowed up in the wonder of it again.

It was tube-shaped, standing about a foot high, with a seven inch diameter at the top and five inches at the bottom. The top was smooth as the skin head of a drum. On the sides were what appeared to be the remnants of a bewildering flurry of designs. But what was most marvelous about it was that the stone was hollow. It weighed about the same as a fat hardcover book.

"Listen," Jilly said and gave the top of the drum a rap-a-tap-tap.

The stone responded with a quiet rhythm that resonated eerily in the study. Unfortunately, Goon chose that moment to arrive in the doorway with a tray laden with tea mugs, tea pot and a platter of his home-made biscuits. At the sound of the drum, the tray fell from his hands. It hit the floor with a crash, spraying tea, milk, sugar, biscuits and bits of crockery every which way.

Jilly turned, her heartbeat double-timing in her chest, just in time to see an indescribable look cross over Goon's features. It might have been surprise, it might have been laughter, but it was gone too quickly for her to properly note. He merely stood in the doorway now, his usual glowering look on his face, and all Jilly was left with was a feeling of unaccountable guilt.

"I didn't mean . . . " Jilly began, but her voice trailed off.

"Bit of a mess," Bramley said.

"I'll get right to it," Goon said.

His small dark eyes centered their gaze on Jilly for too long a moment,

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then he turned away to fetch a broom and dustpan. When Jilly turned back to the desk, she found Bramley rubbing his hands together, face pressed close to the stone drum. He looked up at her over his glasses, grinning.

"Did you see?" he said. "Goon recognized it for what it is, straight off. It has to be a skookin artifact. Didn't like you meddling around with it either."

That was hardly the conclusion that Jilly would have come to on her own. It was the sudden and unexpected sound that had more than likely startled Goon—as it might have startled anyone who wasn't expecting it. That was the reasonable explanation, but she knew well enough that reasonable didn't necessarily always mean right. When she thought of that look that had passed over Goon's features, like a trough of surprise or mocking humor between two cresting glowers, she didn't know what to think, so she let herself get taken away by the professor's enthusiasm, because. . . . well, just what if. . . ?

By all of Christy Riddell's accounts, there wasn't a better candidate for skookin-dom than Bramley's housekeeper.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

Bramley shrugged and began to polish his glasses. Jilly was about to nudge him into making at least the pretense of a theory, but then she realized that the professor had simply fallen silent because Goon was back to clean up the mess. She waited until Goon had made his retreat with the promise of putting on another pot of tea before she leaned over Bramley's desk.

"Well?" she asked.

"Found it in Old City, did you?" he replied.

Jilly nodded.

"You know what they say about skookin treasure. . . ?"

They meaning he and Riddell, Jilly thought, but she obligingly tried to remember that particular story from *Underhill and Deeper Still*. She had it after a moment. It was the one called "The Man With the Monkey," and had something to do with a stolen apple that was withered and moldy in Old City but became solid gold when it was brought above ground. At the end of the story, the man who'd stolen it from the skookin was found in little pieces scattered all over Fitzhenry Park. . . .

Jilly shivered.

"Now I remember why I don't like to read Riddell's stuff," she said. "He can be so sweet on one page, and then on the next he's taking you on a tour through an abattoir."

"Just like life," Bramley said.

"Wonderful. So what are you saying?"

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"They'll be wanting it back," Bramley said.

Jilly woke some time after midnight with the professor's words ringing in her ears.

They'll be wanting it back.

She glanced at the stone drum where it sat on a crate by the window of her Yoors Street loft in Foxville. From where she lay on her Murphy bed, the streetlights coming in the window wove a haloing effect around the stone artifact. The drum glimmered with magic—or at least with a potential for magic. And there was something else in the air. A humming sound, like barely audible strains of music. The notes seemed disconnected, drifting randomly through the melody like dust motes dancing in a beam of sunlight, but there was still a melody present.

She sat up slowly. Pushing the quilt aside, she padded barefoot across the room. When she reached the drum, the change in perspective made the streetlight halo slide away; the drum's magic fled. It was just an odd stone artifact once more. She ran her finger along the smoothed indentations that covered the sides of the artifact, but didn't touch the top. It was still marvelous enough—a hollow stone, a mystery, a puzzle. But. . . .

She remembered the odd almost-but-not-quite music she'd heard when she first awoke and cocked her ear, listening for it.

Nothing.

Outside, a light drizzle had wet the pavement, making Yoors Street glisten and sparkle with its sheen. She knelt down by the windowsill and leaned forward, looking out, feeling lonely. It'd be nice if Geordie were here, even if his brother did write those books that so enamored the professor, but Geordie was out of town this week. Maybe she should get a cat or a dog—just something to keep her company when she got into one of these odd funks—but the problem with pets was that they tied you down. No more gallivanting about whenever and wherever you pleased. Not when the cat needed to be fed. Or the dog had to be walked.

Sighing, she started to turn from the window, then paused. A flicker of uneasiness stole up her spine as she looked more closely at what had caught her attention—there, across the street. Time dissolved into a pattern as random as that faint music she'd heard when she woke earlier. Minutes and seconds marched sideways; the hands of the old Coors clock on her wall stood still.

A figure leaned against the wall, there, just to one side of the display window of the Chinese grocerteria across the street, a figure as much a patchwork as the disarray in the shop's window. Pumpkin head under a wide-brimmed hat. A larger pumpkin for the body with what looked like straw spilling out from between the buttons of its too-small jacket. Arms

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and legs as thin as broom handles. A wide slit for a mouth; eyes like the sharp yellow slits of a jack o'lantern with a candle burning inside.

A Halloween creature. And not alone.

There was another, there, in the mouth of that alleyway. A third clinging to the wall of the brownstone beside the grocerteria. Four more on the rooftop directly across the street—pumpkinheads lined up along the parapet, all in a row.

Skookin, Jilly thought, and she shivered with fear, remembering Christy Riddell's story.

Damn Riddell for tracking the story down, and damn the professor for reminding her of it. And damn the job that had sent her down into Old City in the first place to take photos for the background of the painting she was currently working on.

Because there shouldn't be any such thing as skookin. Because . . .

She blinked, then rubbed her eyes. Her gaze darted left and right, up and down, raking the street and the faces of buildings across the way.

Nothing.

No pumpkin goblins watching her loft.

The sound of her clock ticking the seconds away was suddenly loud in her ears. A taxi went by on the street below, spraying a fine sheet of water from its wheels. She waited for it to pass, then studied the street again.

There were no skookin.

Of course there wouldn't be, she told herself, trying to laugh at how she'd let her imagination run away with itself, but she couldn't muster up even the first hint of a smile. She looked at the drum, reached a hand toward it, then let her hand fall to her lap, the drum untouched. She turned her attention back to the street, watching it for long moments before she finally had to accept that there was nothing out there, that she had only peopled it with her own night fears.

Pushing herself up from the sill, she returned to bed and lay down again. The palm of her right hand itched a little, right where she'd managed to poke herself on a small nail or wood sliver while she was down in Old City. She scratched her hand and stared up at the ceiling, trying to go to sleep, but not expecting to have much luck. Surprisingly, she drifted off in moments.

And dreamed.

Of Bramley's study. Except the professor wasn't ensconced behind his desk as usual. Instead, he was setting out a serving of tea for her and Goon, who had taken the professor's place behind the tottering stacks of papers and books on the desk.

"Skookin," Goon said, when the professor had finished serving them their tea and left the room. "They've never existed, of course."

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Jilly nodded in agreement.

"Though in some ways," Goon went on, "they've always existed. In here—" He tapped his temple with a gnarly, very skookin-like finger. "In our imaginations."

"But—" Jilly began, wanting to tell him how she'd *seen* skookin, right out there on her very own street tonight, but Goon wasn't finished.

"And that's what makes them real," he said.

His head suddenly looked very much like a pumpkin. He leaned forward, eyes glittering as though a candle was burning there inside his head, flickering in the wind.

"And if they're real," he said.

His voice wound down alarmingly, as though it came from the spiraling groove of a spoken word album that someone had slowed by dragging their finger along on the vinyl.

"Then. You're. In. A. Lot. Of—"

Jilly awoke with a start to find herself backed up against the frame of the head of her bed, her hands worrying and tangling her quilt into knots.

Just a dream. Cast off thoughts, tossed up by her subconscious. Nothing to worry about. Except . . .

She could finish the dream-Goon's statement.

If they were real . . .

Never mind being in trouble. If they were real, then she was doomed.

She didn't get any more sleep that night, and first thing the next morning, she went looking for help.

"Skookin," Meran said, trying hard not to laugh.

"Oh, I know what it sounds like," Jilly said, "but what can you do? Riddell's books are Bramley's pet blind spot and if you listen to him long enough, he'll have you believing anything."

"But skookin," Meran repeated and this time she did giggle.

Jilly couldn't help but laugh with her.

Everything felt very different in the morning light—especially when she had someone to talk it over with whose head wasn't filled with Christy Riddell's stories.

They were sitting in Kathryn's Cafe—an hour or so after Jilly had found Meran Kelledy down by the Lake, sitting on the pier and watching the early morning joggers run across the sand—yuppies from downtown, health-conscious gentry from the Beaches.

It was a short walk up Battersfield Road to where Kathryn's was nestled in the heart of Lower Crowsea. Like the area itself, with its narrow streets and old stone buildings, the cafe had an old world feel about it—from the dark wood paneling and hand carved chair backs to

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the small round tables, with checkered tablecloths, fat glass condiment containers and straw-wrapped wine bottles used as candleholders. The music piped in over the house sound system was mostly along the lines of Telemann and Vivaldi, Kitaro and old Bob James albums. The waitresses wore cream-colored pinafores over flowerprint dresses.

But if the atmosphere was old world, the clientele were definitely contemporary. Situated so close to Butler U., Kathryn's had been a favorite haunt of the university's students since it first opened its doors in the mid-sixties as a coffee house. Though much had changed from those early days, music was still played on its small stage on Friday and Saturday nights, as well as poetry recitations on Wednesdays, and Sunday morning storytelling sessions.

Jilly and Meran sat by a window, coffee and homemade banana muffins set out on the table in front of them.

"Whatever were you *doing* down there anyway?" Meran asked. "It's not exactly the safest place to be wandering about."

Jilly nodded. The skells in Old City weren't all thin and wasted. Some were big and mean-looking, capable of anything—not really the sort of people Jilly should be around, because if something went wrong. . . . well, she was the kind of woman for whom the word petite had been coined. She was small and slender—her tiny size only accentuated by the oversized clothing she tended to wear. Her brown hair was a thick tangle, her eyes the electric blue of sapphires.

She was too pretty and too small to be wandering about in places like Old City on her own.

"You know the band, No Nuns Here?" Jilly asked.

Meran nodded.

"I'm doing the cover painting for their first album," Jilly explained. "They wanted something moody for the background—sort of like the Tombs, but darker and grimmer—and I thought Old City would be the perfect place to get some reference shots."

"But, to go there on your own . . ."

Jilly just shrugged. She was known to wander anywhere and everywhere, at any time of the night or day, camera or sketchbook in hand, often both.

Meran shook her head. Like most of Jilly's friends, she'd long since given up trying to point out the dangers of carrying on the way Jilly did.

"So you found this drum," she said.

Jilly nodded. She looked down at the little scab on the palm of her hand. It itched like crazy, but she was determined not to scratch it open again.

"And now you want to. . . . ?"

Jilly looked up. "Take it back. Only I'm scared to go there on my own.

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I thought maybe Cerin would come with me—for moral support, you know?"

"He's out of town," Meran said.

Meran and her husband made up the two halves of the Kelledys, a local traditional music duo that played coffee houses, festivals, and colleges from one coast to the other. For years now, however, Newford had been their home base.

"He's teaching another of those harp workshops," Meran added.

Jilly did her best to hide her disappointment.

What she'd told Meran about "moral support" was only partly the reason she'd wanted their help because, more so than either Riddell's stories, or Bramley's askewed theories, the Kelledys were the closest thing to real magic that she could think of in Newford. There was an otherwordly air about the two of them that went beyond the glamour that seemed to always gather around people who became successful in their creative endeavors.

It wasn't something Jilly could put her finger on. It wasn't as though they went on and on about this sort of thing at the drop of a hat the way that Bramley did. Nor that they were responsible for anything more mysterious than the enchantment they awoke on stage when they were playing their instruments. It was just there. Something that gave the impression that they were aware of what lay beyond the here and now. That they could see things others couldn't; knew things that remained secret to anyone else.

Nobody even knew where they had come from; they'd just arrived in Newford a few years ago, speaking with accents that had rapidly vanished, and here they'd pretty well stayed ever since. Jilly had always privately supposed that if there was a place called Faerie, then that was from where they'd come, so when she'd woken up this morning, deciding she'd needed magical help, she'd gone looking for one or the other and found Meran. But now . . .

"Oh," she said.

Meran smiled.

"But that doesn't mean I can't try to help," she said.

Jilly sighed. Help with what? she had to ask herself. The more she thought about it, the sillier it all seemed. Skookin. Right. Maybe they held debating contests with Riddell's mutant rats.

"I think maybe I'm nuts," she said finally. "I mean, goblins living under the city. . . . ?"

"I believe in the little people," Meran said. "We called them bodachs where I come from."

Jilly just looked at her.

"But you laughed when I talked about them," she said finally.

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"I know—and I shouldn't have. It's just that whenever I hear that name that Christy's given them, I can't help myself. It's so silly."

"What I saw last night didn't feel silly," Jilly said.

If she'd actually seen anything. By this point—even with Meran's apparent belief—she wasn't sure what to think anymore.

"No," Meran said. "I suppose not. But—you're taking the drum back, so why are you so nervous?"

"The man in Christy's story returned the apple he stole," Jilly said, "and you know what happened to him. . . . "

"That's true," Meran said, frowning.

"I thought maybe Cerin could . . ." Jilly's voice trailed off.

A small smile touched Meran's lips. "Could do what?"

"Well, this is going to sound even sillier," Jilly admitted, "but I've always pictured him as sort of a wizard type."

Meran laughed. "He'd love to hear that. And what about me? Have I acquired wizardly status as well?"

"Not exactly. You always struck me as being an earth spirit—like you stepped out of an oak tree or something." Jilly blushed, feeling as though she was making even more of a fool of herself than ever, but now that she'd started, she felt she had to finish. "It's sort of like he learned magic, while you just are magic."

She glanced at her companion, looking for laughter, but Meran was regarding her gravely. And she did look like a dryad, Jilly thought, what with the green streaks in the long, nut-brown ringlets of her hair and her fey sort of Pre-Raphaelite beauty. Her eyes seemed to provide their own light, rather than take it in.

"Maybe I did step out of a tree one day," Meran said.

Jilly could feel her mouth forming a surprised "O," but then Meran laughed again.

"But probably I didn't," she said. Before Jilly could ask her about that "probably," Meran went on: "We'll need some sort of protection against them."

Jilly made her mind shift gears, from Meran's origins to the problem at hand.

"Like holy water or a cross?" she asked.

Her head filled with the plots of a hundred bad horror films, each of them clamoring for attention.

"No," Meran said. "Religious artifacts and trappings require faith—a belief in their potency that the skookin undoubtedly don't have. The only thing I know for certain that they can't abide is the truth."

"The truth?"

Meran nodded. "Tell them the truth—even if it's only historical facts and trivia—and they'll shun you as though you were carrying a plague."

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"But what about after?" Jilly said. "After we've delivered the drum and they come looking for me? Do I have to walk around carrying a cassette machine spouting dates and facts for the rest of my life?"

"I hope not."

"But—"

"Patience," Meran replied. "Let me think about it for awhile."

Jilly sighed. She regarded her companion curiously as Meran took a sip of her coffee.

"You really believe in this stuff, don't you?" she said finally.

"Don't you?"

Jilly had to think about that for a moment.

"Last night I was scared," she said, "and I'm returning the drum because I'd rather be safe than sorry, but I'm still not sure."

Meran nodded understandingly, but, "Your coffee's getting cold," was all she had to say.

Meran let Jilly stay with her that night in the rambling old house where she and Cerin lived. Straddling the border between Lower Crowsea and Chinatown, it was a tall, gabled building surrounded by giant oak trees. There was a rounded tower in the front, to the right of a long screen-enclosed porch, stables around the back and a garden along the west side of the house that seemed to have been plucked straight from a postcard of the English countryside.

Jilly loved this area. The Kelledys' house was the easternmost of the stately estates that stood, row on row, along McKennit Street, between Lee and Yoors. Whenever Jilly walked along this part of McKennit, late at night when the streetcars were tucked away in their downtown station and there was next to no other traffic, she found it easy to imagine that the years had wound back to a bygone age when time moved at a different pace, when Newford's streets were cobblestoned and the vehicles that traversed them were horse-drawn, rather than horse-powered.

"You'll wear a hole in the glass if you keep staring through it so intently."

Jilly started. She turned long enough to acknowledge her hostess' presence, then her gaze was dragged back to the window, to the shadows cast by the oaks as twilight stretched them across the lawn, to the long low wall that bordered the lawn, to the street beyond.

Still no skookin. Did that mean they didn't exist, or that they hadn't come out yet? Or maybe they just hadn't tracked her here to the Kelledys' house.

She started again as Meran laid a hand on her shoulder and gently turned her from the window.

"Who knows what you'll call to us, staring so," Meran said.

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Her voice held the same light tone as it had when she'd made her earlier comment, but this time a certain sense of caution lay behind the words.

"If they come, I want to see them," Jilly said.

Meran nodded. "I understand. But remember this: the night's a magical time. The moon rules her hours, not the sun."

"What does that mean?"

"The moon likes secrets," Meran said. "And secret things. She lets mysteries bleed into her shadows and leaves us to ask whether they originated from otherworlds, or from our own imaginations."

"You're beginning to sound like Bramley," Jilly said. "Or Christy."

"Remember your Shakespeare," Meran said. " 'This fellow's wise enough to play the fool.' Did you ever think that perhaps their studied eccentricity protects them from sharper ridicule?"

"You mean all those things Christy writes about are *true*?"

"I didn't say that."

Jilly shook her head. "No. But you're talking in riddles just like a wizard out of some fairy tale. I never understood why they couldn't talk plainly."

"That's because some things can only be approached from the side. Secretively. Peripherally."

Whatever Jilly was about to say next, died stillborn. She pointed out the window to where the lawn was almost swallowed by shadows.

"Do . . ." She swallowed thickly, then tried again. "Do you see them?"

They were out there, flitting between the wall that bordered the Kelledys' property and those tall oaks that stood closer to the house. Shadow shapes. Fat, pumpkin-bodied and twig-limbed. There were more of them than there'd been last night. And they were bolder. Creeping right up toward the house. Threats burning in their candle-flicker eyes. Wide mouths open in jack-o-lantern grins, revealing rows of pointed teeth.

One came sidling right up the window, its face monstrous at such close proximity. Jilly couldn't move, couldn't even breathe. She remembered what Meran had said earlier—

they can't abide the truth

—but she couldn't frame a sentence, never mind a word, and her mind was filled with only a wild unreasoning panic. The creature reached out a hand toward the glass, clawed fingers extended. Jilly could feel a scream building up, deep inside her. In a moment that hand would come crashing through the window, shattering glass, clawing at her throat. And she couldn't move. All she could do was stare, stare as the claws reached for the glass, stare as it drew back to—

Something fell between the creature and the house—a swooping,

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shapeless thing. The creature danced back, saw that it was only the bough of one of the oak trees and was about to begin its approach once more, but the cries of its companions distracted it. Not until it turned its horrible gaze from her did Jilly feel able to lift her own head.

She stared at the oaks. A sudden wind had sprung up, lashing the boughs about so that the tall trees appeared to be giants, flailing about their many-limbed arms like monstrous, agitated octopi. The creatures in the yard scattered and in moments they were gone—each and every one of them. The wind died down; the animated giants became just oak trees once more.

Jilly turned slowly from the window to find Meran pressed close beside her.

"Ugly, furtive, and sullen," Meran said. "Perhaps Christy wasn't so far off in naming them."

"They . . . they're real, aren't they?" Jilly asked in a small voice.

Meran nodded. "And not at all like the bodachs of my homeland. Bodachs are mischievous and prone to trouble, but not like this. Those creatures were weaned on malevolence."

Jilly leaned weakly against the windowsill.

"What are we going to *do?*" she asked.

She scratched at her palm—the itch was worse than ever. Meran caught her hand, pulled it away. There was an unhappy look in her eyes when she lifted her gaze from the mark on Jilly's palm.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

Jilly looked down at her palm. The scab was gone, but the skin was all dark around the puncture wound now—an ugly black discoloration that was twice the size of the original scab.

"I scratched myself," she said. "Down in Old City."

Meran shook her head. "No," she said. "They've marked you."

Jilly suddenly felt weak. Skookin were real. Mysterious winds rose to animate trees. And now she was marked.

She wasn't even sure what that meant, but she didn't like the sound of it. Not for a moment.

Her gaze went to the stone drum where it stood on Meran's mantel. She didn't think she'd ever hated an inanimate object so much before.

"Marked . . .me . . . ?" she asked.

"I've heard of this before," Meran said, her voice apologetic. She touched the mark on Jilly's palm. "This is like a . . . bounty."

"They really want to kill me, don't they?"

Jilly was surprised that her voice sounded as calm as it did. Inside she felt as though she was crumbling to little bits all over the place.

"Skookin are real," she went on, "and they're going to tear me up into little pieces—just like they did to the man in Christy's stupid story."

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Meran gave her a sympathetic look.

"We have to go now," she said. "We have to go and confront them now, before . . ."

"Before what?"

Jilly's control over her voice was slipping. Her last word went shrieking up in pitch.

"Before they send something worse," Meran said.

Oh great, Jilly thought as she waited for Meran to change into clothing more suitable for the underground trek to Old City. Not only were skookin real, but there were worse things than those pumpkinhead creatures living down there under the city.

She slouched in one of the chairs by the mantelpiece, her back to the stone drum, and pretended that her nerves weren't all scraped raw, that she was just over visiting a friend for the evening and everything was just peachy, thank you. Surprisingly, by the time Meran returned, wearing jeans, sturdy walking shoes and a thick woolen shirt under a denim jacket, she did feel better.

"The bit with the trees," she asked as she rose from her chair. "Did you do that?"

Meran shook her head.

"But the wind likes me," she said. "Maybe it's because I play the flute."

And maybe it's because you're a dryad, Jilly thought, and the wind's got a thing about oak trees, but she let the thought go unspoken.

Meran fetched the long, narrow bag that held her flute and slung it over her shoulder.

"Ready?" she asked.

"No," Jilly said.

But she went and took the drum from the mantelpiece and joined Meran by the front door. Meran stuck a flashlight in the pocket of her jacket and handed another to Jilly, who thrust it into the pocket of the coat Meran was lending her. It was at least two sizes too big for her, which suited Jilly just fine.

Naturally, just to make the night complete, it started to rain before they got halfway down the walkway to McKennit Street.

For safety's sake, city work crews had sealed up all the entrances to Old City in the mid-seventies—all the entrances of which the city was aware, at any rate. The street people of Newford's back lanes and alleys knew of anywhere from a half-dozen to twenty others that could still be used, the number depending only on who was doing the bragging. The entrance to which Jilly led Meran was the most commonly known and used—a steel maintenance door that was situated two hundred yards or so down the east tracks of the Grasso Street subway station.

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The door led into the city's sewer maintenance tunnels, but had long since been abandoned. Skells had broken the locking mechanism and the door stood continually ajar. Inside, time and weathering had worn down a connecting wall between the maintenance tunnels and what had once been the top floor of one of Old City's proud skyscrapers—an office complex that had towered some four stories above the city's streets before the quake dropped it into its present subterranean setting.

It was a good fifteen minute walk from the Kelledys' house to the Grasso Street station and Jilly plodded miserably through the rain at Meran's side for every block of it. Her sneakers were soaked and her hair plastered against her scalp. She carried the stone drum tucked under one arm and was very tempted to simply pitch it in front of a bus.

"This is crazy," Jilly said. "We're just giving ourselves up to them."

Meran shook her head. "No. We're confronting them of our own free will—there's a difference."

"That's just semantics. There won't be a difference in the results."

"That's where you're wrong."

They both turned at the sound of a new voice to find Goon standing in the doorway of a closed antique shop. His eyes glittered oddly in the poor light, reminding Jilly all too much of the skookin, and he didn't seem to be the least bit wet.

"What are *you* doing here?" Jilly demanded.

"You must always confront your fears," Goon said as though she hadn't spoken. "Then skulking monsters become merely unfamiliar shadows, thrown by a tree bough. Whispering voices are just the wind. The wild flare of panic is merely a burst of emotion, not a terror spell cast by some evil witch."

Meran nodded. "That's what Cerin would say. And that's what I mean to do. Confront them with a truth so bright that they won't dare come near us again."

Jilly held up her hand. The discoloration was spreading. It had grown from its pinprick inception, first to the size of a dime, now to that of a silver dollar.

"What about this?" she asked.

"There's always a price for meddling," Goon agreed. "Sometimes it's the simple curse of knowledge."

"There's always a price," Meran agreed.

Everybody always seemed to know more than she did these days, Jilly thought unhappily.

"You still haven't told me what you're doing here," she told Goon. "Skulking about and following us."

Goon smiled. "It seems to me that you came up upon me."

"You know what I mean."

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"I have my own business in Old City tonight," he said. "And since we all have the same destination in mind, I thought perhaps you would appreciate the company."

Everything was wrong about this, Jilly thought. Goon was never nice to her. Goon was never nice to anyone.

"Yeah, well, you can just—" she began.

Meran laid a hand on Jilly's arm. "It's bad luck to turn away help when it's freely offered."

"But you don't know what he's like," Jilly said.

"Olaf and I have met before," Meran said.

Jilly caught the grimace on Goon's face at the use of his given name. It made him seem more himself, which, while not exactly comforting, was at least familiar. Then she looked at Meran. She thought of the wind outside the musician's house, driving away the skookin, the mystery that cloaked her which ran even deeper, perhaps, than that which Goon wore so easily. . . .

"Sometimes you just have to trust in people," Meran said, as though reading Jilly's mind.

Jilly sighed. She rubbed her itchy palm against her thigh, shifted the drum into a more comfortable position.

"Okay," she said. "So what're we waiting for?"

The few times Jilly had come down to Old City, she'd been cautious, perhaps even a little nervous, but never frightened. Tonight was different. It was always dark in Old City, but the darkness had never seemed so . . . so watchful before. There were always odd little sounds, but they had never seemed so furtive. Even with her companions—maybe because of them, she thought, thinking mostly of Goon—she felt very much alone in the eerie darkness.

Goon didn't appear to need the wobbly rays of their flashlights to see his way, and though he seemed content enough to simply follow them, Jilly couldn't shake the feeling that he was actually leading the way. They were soon in a part of the subterranean city that she'd never seen before.

There was less dust and dirt here. No litter, nor the remains of the skells' fires. No broken bottles, nor the piles of newspapers and ratty blanketing that served the skells as bedding. The buildings seemed in better repair. The air had a clean, dry smell to it, rather than the close, musty reek of refuse and human wastes that it carried closer to the entrance.

And there were no people.

From when they'd first stepped through the steel door in Grasso Street station's east tunnel, she hadn't seen a bag lady or wino or any kind of

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skell, and that in itself was odd because they were always down here. But there was something sharing the darkness with them. Something watched them, marked their progress, followed with a barely discernible pad of sly footsteps in their wake and on either side.

The drum seemed warm against the skin of her hand. The blemish on her other palm prickled with itchiness. Her shoulder muscles were stiff with tension.

"Not far now," Goon said softly and Jilly suddenly understood what it meant to jump out of one's skin.

The beam of her flashlight made a wild arc across the faces of the buildings on either side as she started. Her heartbeat jumped into second gear.

"What do you see?" Meran asked, her voice calm.

The beam of her flashlight turned toward Goon and he pointed ahead.

"Turn off your flashlights," he said.

Oh sure, Jilly thought. Easy for you to say.

But she did so a moment after Meran had. The sudden darkness was so abrupt that Jilly thought she'd gone blind. But then she realized that it wasn't as black as it should be. Looking ahead to where Goon had pointed, she could see a faint glow seeping onto the street ahead of them. It was a little less than a half block away, the source of the light hidden behind the squatting bulk of a half-tumbled down building.

"What could it . . .?" Jilly started to say, but then the sounds began, and the rest of her words dried up in her throat.

It was supposed to be music, she realized after a few moments, but there was no discernible rhythm and while the sounds were blown or rasped or plucked from instruments, they searched in vain for a melody.

"It begins," Goon said.

He took the lead, hurrying them up to the corner of the street.

"What does?" Jilly wanted to know.

"The king appears—as he must once a moon. It's that or lose his throne."

Jilly wanted to know what he was talking about—better yet, *how* he knew what he was talking about—but she didn't have a chance. The discordant not-music scraped and squealed to a kind of crescendo. Suddenly they were surrounded by the capering forms of dozens of skookin that bumped them, thin long fingers tugging at their clothing. Jilly shrieked at the first touch. One of them tried to snatch the drum from her grip. She regained control of her nerves at the same time as she pulled the artifact free from the grasping fingers.

"1789," she said. "That's when the Bastille was stormed and the French Revolution began. Uh, 1807, slave trade was abolished in the British Empire. 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed."

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The skookin backed away from her, as did the others, hissing and spitting. The not-music continued, but its tones were softened.

"Let me see," Jilly went on. "Uh, 1981, the Argentines invade—I can't keep this up, Meran—the Falklands. 1715 . . . that was the year of the first Jacobite uprising."

She'd always been good with historical trivia—having a head for dates—but the more she concentrated on them right now, the further they seemed to slip away. The skookin were regarding her with malevolence, just waiting for her to falter.

"1978," she said. "Sandy Denny died, falling down some stairs. . . . "

She'd got that one from Geordie. The skookin took another step back and she stepped toward them, into the light, her eyes widening with shock. There was a small park there, vegetation dead, trees leafless and skeletal, shadows dancing from the light cast by a fire at either end of the open space. And it was teeming with skookin.

There seemed to be hundreds of the creatures. She could see some of the musicians who were making that awful din—holding their instruments as though they'd never played them before. They were gathered in a semi-circle around a dais made from slabs of pavement and building rubble. Standing on it was the weirdest looking skookin she'd seen yet. He was kind of withered and stood stiffly. His eyes flashed with a kind of dead, cold light. He had the grimmest look about him that she'd seen on any of them yet.

There was no way her little bits of history were going to be enough to keep back this crew. She turned to look at her companions. She couldn't see Goon, but Meran was tugging her flute free from its carrying bag.

What good was that going to do? Jilly wondered.

"It's another kind of truth," Meran said as she brought the instrument up to her lips.

The flute's clear tones echoed breathily along the street, cutting through the jangle of not-music like a glass knife through muddy water. Jilly held her breath. The music was so beautiful. The skookin cowered where they stood. Their cacophonic noise-making, faltered, then fell silent.

No one moved.

For long moments, there was just the clear sound of Meran's flute, breathing a slow plaintive air that echoed and sang down the street, winding from one end of the park to the other.

Another kind of truth, Jilly remembered Meran saying just before she began to play. That's exactly what this music was, she realized. A kind of truth.

The flute playing finally came to an achingly sweet finale and a hush fell in Old City. And then there was movement. Goon stepped from

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behind Jilly and walked through the still crowd of skookin to the dais where their king stood. He clambered up over the rubble until he was beside the king. He pulled a large clasp knife from the pocket of his coat. As he opened the blade, the skookin made a jerky motion to get away, but Goon's knife hand moved quickly.

He slashed and cut.

Now he's bloody done it, Jilly thought as the skookin king tumbled to the stones. But then she realized that Goon hadn't cut the king. He'd cut the air above the king. He'd cut the . . . the realization only confused her more . . . strings holding him?

"What . . .?" she said.

"Come," Meran said.

She tucked her flute under her arm and led Jilly toward the dais.

"This is your king," Goon was saying.

He reached down and pulled the limp form up by the fine-webbed strings that were attached to the king's arms and shoulders. The king dangled loosely under his strong grip—a broken marionette. A murmur rose from the crowd of skookin—part ugly, part wondering.

"The king is dead," Goon said. "He's been dead for moons. I wondered why Old City was closed to me this past half year, and now I know."

There was movement at the far end of the park—a fleeing figure. It had been the king's councilor, Goon told Jilly and Meran later. Some of the skookin made to chase him, but Goon called them back.

"Let him go," he said. "He won't return. We have other business at hand."

Meran had drawn Jilly right up to the foot of the dais and was gently pushing her forward.

"Go on," she said.

"Is he the king now?" Jilly asked.

Meran smiled and gave her another gentle push.

Jilly looked up. Goon seemed just like he always did when she saw him at Bramley's—grumpy and out of sorts. Maybe it's just his face, she told herself, trying to give herself courage. There's people who look grumpy no matter how happy they are. But the thought didn't help contain her shaking much as she slowly made her way up to where Goon stood.

"You have something of ours," Goon said.

His voice was grim. Christy's story lay all too clearly in Jilly's head. She swallowed dryly.

"Uh, I never meant . . ." she began, then simply handed over the drum.

Goon took it reverently, then snatched her other hand before she could draw away. Her palm flared with sharp pain—all the skin from the base of her hand to the ends of her fingers was black.

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The curse, she thought. It's going to make my hand fall right off. I'm never going to paint again. . . .

Goon spat on her palm and the pain died as though it had never been. With wondering eyes, Jilly watched the blackness dry up and begin to flake away. Goon gave her hand a shake and the blemish scattered to fall to the ground. Her hand was completely unmarked.

"But. . . the curse," she said. "The bounty on my head. What about Christy's story. . . ?"

"Your curse is knowledge," Goon said.

"But. . . ?"

He turned away to face the crowd, drum in hand. As Jilly made her careful descent back to where Meran was waiting for her, Goon tapped his fingers against the head of the drum. An eerie rhythm started up—a real rhythm. When the skookin musicians began to play, they held their instruments properly and called up a sweet stately music to march across the back of the rhythm. It was a rich tapestry of sound, as different from Meran's solo flute as sunlight is from twilight, but it held its own power. Its own magic.

Goon led the playing with the rhythm he called up from the stone drum, led the music as though he'd always led it.

"He's really the king, isn't he?" Jilly whispered to her companion.

Meran nodded.

"So then what was he doing working for Bramley?"

"I don't know," Meran replied. "I suppose a king—or a king's son—can do pretty well what he wants just so long as he comes back here once a moon to fulfill his obligation as ruler."

"Do you think he'll go back to work for Bramley?"

"I know he will," Meran replied.

Jilly looked out at the crowd of skookin. They didn't seem at all threatening anymore. They just looked like little men—comical, with their tubby bodies and round heads and their little broomstick limbs—but men all the same. She listened to the music, felt its trueness and had to ask Meran why it didn't hurt them.

"Because it's their truth," Meran replied.

"But truth's just truth," Jilly protested. "Something's either true or it's not."

Meran just put her arm around Jilly's shoulder. A touch of a smile came to the corners of her mouth.

"It's time we went home," she said.

"I got off pretty lightly, didn't I?" Jilly said as they started back the way they'd come. "I mean, with the curse and all."

"Knowledge can be a terrible burden," Meran replied. "It's what some believe cast Adam and Eve from Eden."

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"But that was a good thing, wasn't it?"

Meran nodded. "I think so. But it brought pain with it—pain we still feel to this day."

"I suppose."

"Come on," Meran said, as Jilly lagged a little to look back at the park.

Jilly quickened her step, but she carried the scene away with her. Goon and the stone drum. The crowd of skookin. The flickering light of their fires as it cast shadows over the Old City buildings.

And the music played on.

Professor Dapple had listened patiently to the story he'd been told, managing to keep from interrupting through at least half of the telling. Leaning back in his chair when it was done, he took off his glasses and began to needlessly polish them.

"It's going to be very good," he said finally.

Christy Riddell grinned from the club chair where he was sitting.

"But Jilly's not going to like it," Bramley went on. "You know how she feels about your stories."

"But she's the one who told me this one," Christy said.

Bramley rearranged his features to give the impression that he'd known this all along.

"Doesn't seem like much of a curse," he said, changing tack.

Christy raised his eyebrows. "What? To know that it's all real? To have to seriously consider every time she hears about some seemingly preposterous thing, that it might very well be true? To have to keep on guard with what she says so that people won't think she's gone off the deep end?"

"Is that how people look at us?" Bramley asked.

"What do you think?" Christy replied with a laugh.

Bramley hrumphed. He fidgeted with the papers on his desk, making more of a mess of them, rather than less.

"But Goon," he said, finally coming to the heart of what bothered him about what he'd been told. "It's like some retelling of 'The King of the Cats,' isn't it? Are you really going to put that bit in?"

Christy nodded. "It's part of the story."

"I can't see Goon as a king of anything," Bramley said. "And if he *is* a king, then what's he doing still working for me?"

"Which do you think would be better," Christy asked. "To be a king below, or a man above?"

Bramley didn't have an answer for that. ●

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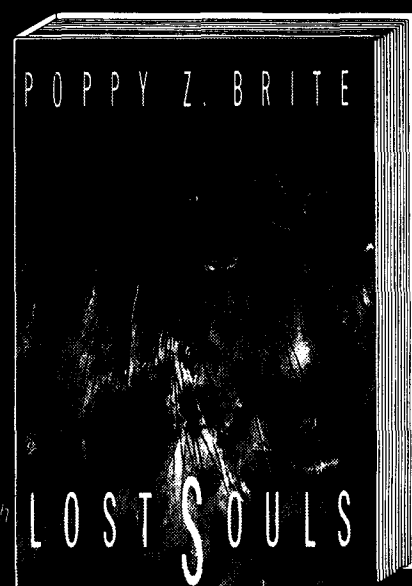

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RENDER UNTO CAESAR

Maureen F. McHugh

The author's earlier *Asimov's* tales, "Baffin Island" (August 1989) and "Kites" (October 1989) make up part of her critically acclaimed first novel, *China Mountain Zhang*. Tor will release the paperback edition of this book in January. Ms. McHugh would like to thank her sister for inspiration on the following story. "Usually, people can't give me direct help on my plots, but Pat did on this one, for which I am grateful."

art: Laurie Harden

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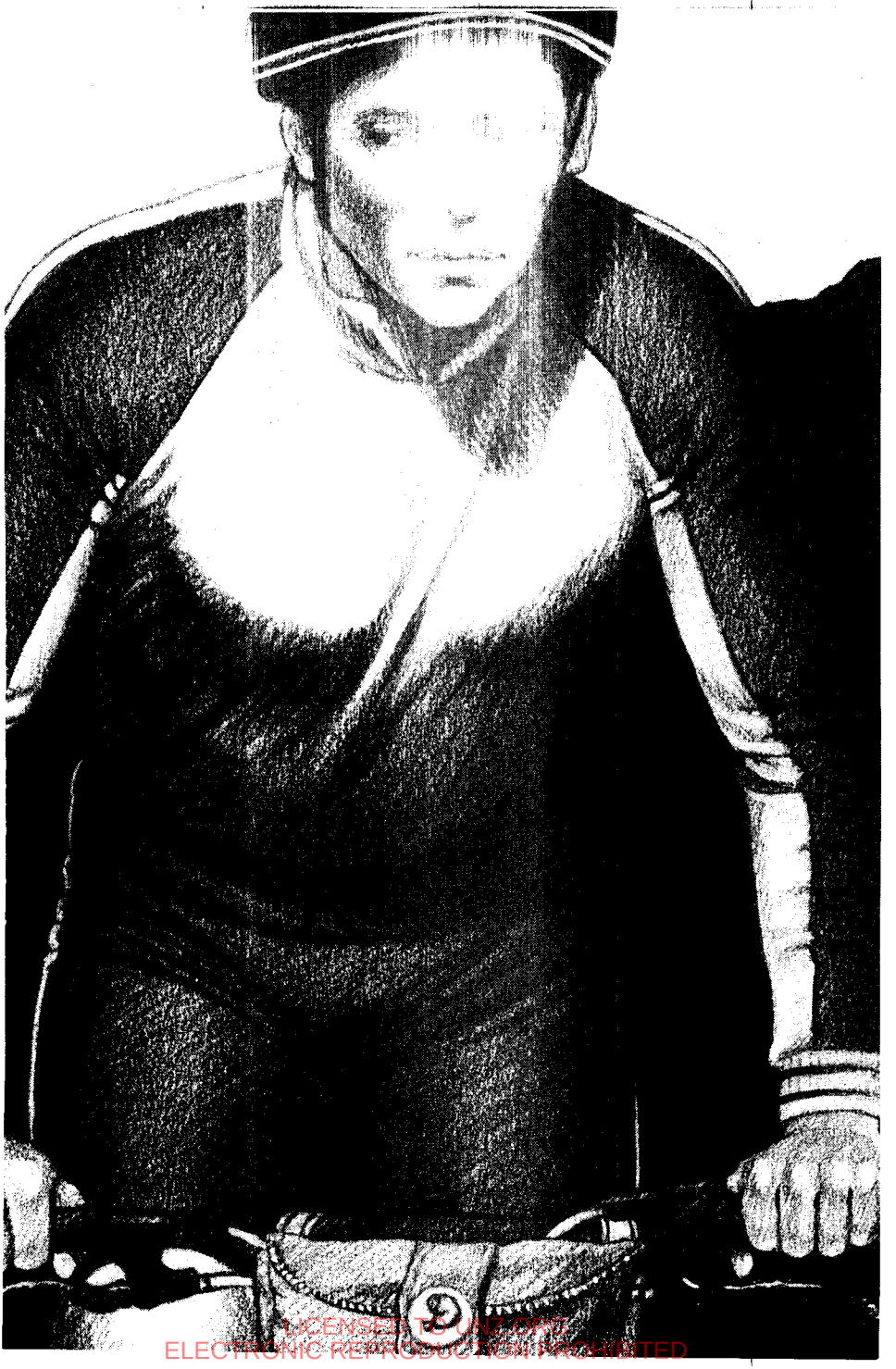

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I walk into the darkened shed and the smith glances up at me and then stares in shock. First he takes in the uniform, then the bicycle so casually hoisted onto my shoulder. I wear yellow bicycle shorts and a yellow helmet with a thin band of imperial red and gold running around the rim. We are meant to be noticeable.

I take the bicycle off my shoulder and lean it against the wall.

"Sir," he says, "how can I help you?"

"Uncle, my brake cable has snapped, I need to replace it," I say. I try not to be abrupt or imposing.

He glances at the bicycle and then at my pouch with the Imperial Phoenix on it, and can not decide which is more amazing, the 12 kilo all-aluminum-frame black bicycle or the sight of a pouch containing an *Imperial Message*.

"Uncle," I say, "do you think you might have the cable?"

"How big?" he asks.

No one deals in gauges out here, so I crack open my tool pouch and in a few moments I can hand him a length of cable. I am tired because I've walked five kilometers with the broken bicycle on my shoulder to get to this man. I've seen smiths work before, but nevertheless I enjoy watching the old man size the cable against his own samples. We all have our skills, and I couldn't do his job.

"Sir," he says, "This is the cable that is the size that equals your cable, but this cable—" he lays a second down next to it and damn if I can see any difference in size, "—it is a little thicker but it is better cable. This," he indicates the first, and shrugs, "I have had it a long time. It's locally made. But this," he points to the second cable, "it is made in Droit. If you can use this," he says respectfully, "I think it would be better."

"It's fine," I say. He gives me the cable and watches as I measure it and cut it. There are people in the doorway watching as well. He doesn't offer to do the repair for me, which is good; if I can do the repair myself, I don't ever let anyone touch my bicycle. And there aren't many repairs I can't do myself.

Droit, I think. I am in Indiana, on my way from Washington to Chicago. Sheago, as they say out here. I have about eighty kilometers, that's about fifty-five miles of good road, about three hours, to South Bend, and if I had not snapped a cable I could be in Chicago tonight. I am tightening the tension when there is a commotion outside and a woman pushes into the shed.

She stops in the doorway and pushes her wheat-colored hair back from her face. Her eyes are wide and pale even in the darkness of the shed. I rise, more in deference to her distress than for any other reason.

"Messenger?" she says, testing the flat air with the title.

"Yes?" I say.

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"Oh, my God," she says and covers her face with her apron. She is wearing a faded red dress; she's a member of the New Harmony. I am not religious, but I'm not in any position to think my perspective is better than hers. New Harmony people are bad conversationalists, but they work hard. I wait for her to speak.

"Will you go through South Bend?" she says after a moment, lifting her shawl and averting her face behind it.

"I'll be just a bit north, on old Interstate 80 and 90," I say. They use the old numbers out here and I've fallen out of the habit of calling it Way Imperial Mortonson. She will ask me to take something, I will explain that I can't.

A man pushes through the group at the door. "Rachel!" he shouts.

"Please," she gasps out, "give this to my son!" And lunges, stuffing a piece of paper into my hand.

"Messenger," the man says, catching her arm, "I'm sorry. He can't do it, Rachel, you know he can't. He's on Imperial business, they're not allowed."

Which is more than most people know. He has the air of a town mayor; he doesn't hold her arm as if he were a husband and had some right to her.

"They said they'll go after him, they told Farra," she tells me.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I say, "but it will have to go by regular messenger." I hold out the paper but she covers her face with her shawl again and cries in hoarse, heavy sobs. The men in the room are embarrassed, and look away, uncertain.

"Rachel," the mayor says, clumsily comforting, "God will take care of him."

"Don't you talk to me of God!" she snaps, pulling the shawl down from her face. "This is a matter for Caesar! *Your* matter, Ketchum, *you* made the Seventh Army angry at us!" And with that, she pulls away from him and goes out of the shack. The men stare at the ground and shift from foot to foot.

"I'm sorry, messenger," the mayor says. "Please excuse her, she isn't normally like this, she's overwrought."

"The Seventh Army is on the road between here and South Bend?" I ask.

"Well, there are some Seventh Soldiers in the area, but they wouldn't interfere with a messenger, I'm sure," he says.

I go back to what I was doing. I have a few hours of riding left this afternoon. *He* might be certain that a Seventh Soldier wouldn't attack a messenger, but I'm not, and I certainly don't want to be out after dark. Normally, in a town like Nevada Mills, the men will finally loosen up enough to want to look at the bicycle, ask me how it works, but here,

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after the incident with the woman, they are all stand-offish. That is all right with me.

I finish the bike and thank the smith. He beams at me and waves away my payment. My watch says 1:27. I wish I'd cut south a bit at Toledo and taken Highway 6. I do sometimes, because I-80 and -90 are so torn up west of Toledo, and because it has such a problem with pirates, but I-80 and -90 has just been swept clean of trouble, and I'm hoping to make a little time.

The Seventh Army isn't pirates. Maybe they *would* ignore a bicycle messenger. Then again, maybe God would speak to one of them out of that concoction of ethanol and homebrew hallucinogens they take, and they'd find me a Holy Mission. I'd never messed with a Seventh Son before. I don't like the idea of God-in-the-whirlwind, particularly when the whirlwind is drug-induced hallucinations. It's that kind of madness that collapses civilizations.

I come through Elkhart at about four-thirty. Washington to Chicago is a long trip. The only way is through Pennsylvania, and the turnpike has never really been straightened out. Seth the Wise, Ruler of the Old Capital, is supposed to have patrols out to keep a bike path open through the wreckage, but it's been a rainy summer, and a lot of the path is mud, and some of it simply isn't there. I had an escort through the labyrinth south of Pitt, but that was the only part of the trip which had gone well.

Still, South Bend puts me only 130 klicks from home. A bath. My wife. From South Bend, it's only 115 klicks to the barricades of South Chicago. Once past the barricades, it's a whole different life.

I-80 and -90 is impassable at points, and there are places you come off, ride a few kilometers on old highway, and come back on. On the outskirts of Elkhart, I see my first Seventh Son. He wears homedyed army greens, the pants wrapped tight against his calves. Cavalry. His bike isn't comparable to mine, it's an old, sturdy-framed English touring bike, probably weighing more than a small child and showing a lot of patching and rust under a bad, khaki paint job. Those old frames stand up to a lot, they need far less maintenance than the bike I'm riding, a gleaming copy of a pre-collapse three speed.

He's sitting in the shade, the bike leaned against the building—Elkhart Videos in faded paint on the brick wall. I try not to pay him any particular mind; in the back of my head, I have it that if I call attention to myself he might see my presence as an omen, a divine sign. He watches me ride past. He's all of a piece, a kid in faded khaki; pale faded brown hair.

Beyond Elkhart, I don't watch over my shoulder and I don't pick up my pace. I'm already riding hard, I've done seventy kilometers in three

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hours. It's good road, but I've been riding a long time and I'm tired. Still, I estimate that if I don't have any more bike trouble, I can be at South Bend by six. I don't actually stop in South Bend, it's too far south, but just off I-80 and -90 is an imperial outpost and I can stay there. I stop at five for water and a bit of relief. Walking back to my bike, I scan the horizon behind me and find I have company. It's too far away to know if it's that Seventh Son, and there's nothing to do but get on the bike.

Seventh Sons fast, and what they do eat, under the best of circumstances, is just enough to keep body and soul together. It's not likely he's done as much riding as I do, either. I don't know how fresh he is, but I figure if I just keep up a steady pace I'll wear him down. Besides, I'm almost to the outpost outside of South Bend.

When I was first riding, I used to pace myself by counting, but I've ridden long enough it's second nature to me. Past Mishawaka; I glance back, and he's still there.

I am finding it hard to not think about Chicago. I'm thirty-four, getting too old to run through the wildness and then slough it off when I get back to the city. That's what I teach my trainees—you have to become two people, yourself when you're home, and something different when you're on the road. A roving eye. A self-contained unit, a detached portion of civilization. Otherwise, the poverty begins to wear you down; next thing you know, when a woman asks you to take a message to her son, you *do* it, because you've become a part of that place and what happens there matters to you. You start thinking you can *help* people. You go back into the city and you carry the wilderness back in with you. Snap at your wife. Look at the manufactured goods in the stores, and at your plumbing, and feel guilty.

I've always been able to divide my life, slice it in two. Out here, I'm an Imperial Messenger, a thing that belongs to the Emperor of Chicago, just like the bicycle. But this is the hard part, almost home. My other life, my real life, is just reaching out to me, wants to give me a name, claim me for a human being.

It is hard to remember, out here, that what feels like privilege, life in the fortress, *is* civilization. Without the Emperor, without barricades and Army and even, yes, messengers, there would *be* no civilization, no order. Chicago, Washington, Pitt, St. Louis are the places that maintain order. I don't help these people by carrying that woman's message; I help them by being part of a larger order. It is necessary to remember that someday these pockets of order are going to spread back out and connect, and then we'll bring back all these once beautiful roads, and it will be safe to ride them, too.

At least the Seventh Son on my tail gives me something to concentrate on, focuses me on the place where I am.

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And he's still there, if it is really him, riding back on the horizon, disappearing and reappearing, he's got to be riding hard; I'm in third gear. He must be pumping, stringy calf muscles propelling him forward, sweat staining great crescent moons under his arms. I can picture his hands clutching the handles, grime worked into the creases of his knuckles—easy enough, all I have to do is look at my own hands; although I've got ram handlebars and a triangle arm rest, there's Washington and Pitt grime worked into my knuckles. What I *can't* imagine, what remains a blank to me, is what he's thinking. If it really *is* him, and not some farmer with a couple of fat white ducks hung by their feet from the handle bars.

But a farmer wouldn't keep up with me. I'm less than an hour from the South Bend turnoff, and the maintained road is wide here, four, five feet, easy riding, so I kick up the pace. I pass a couple of mule carts, one full of sows laid crossways head to tail and glowing pink and black. They look cleaner than the man and boy driving.

My shadow has picked up the pace, too.

I recognize the landmarks that tell me I'm about to make my turn onto 32. The road curves, hiding my shadow from me, and I lean into the bike and sprint, putting distance between us. I know the ramp to 32; last time I was here it was clear, and I race down it, trusting it still is. South on 32 maybe three miles and then off. No sign of pursuit, I can only hope he goes straight for awhile before suspecting I've left I-80 and -90. I pedal past gutted shopping centers and windowless office complexes to a small brick place. The rusted frames of old pick-ups and cars have been piled into a barricade, and a Chicago soldier in brown and yellow is watching from atop. He sees me and waves, and as I coast through the gap in the barricade I smell soup or stew. The infantry man blows three sharp blasts on his whistle. I take off my helmet, feel the air cool against my damp hair.

"Messenger," a man calls, "welcome to an oasis of civilization! You're just in time for dinner." Lieutenant Maxwell remembers me.

Early in the morning, I am on my way on the final leg into Chicago. I am on I-80 and -90 by 6:30 A.M. The way is clear on the west-bound side of the highway, it's a good wide way of three meters, but beside that carefully maintained center, the road is chopped and pitched like rough seas. The sun is just above horizontal and my shadow is a long, exaggerated fellow, many times my height. In the early morning light, oblique shadows run across the Imperial Highway; I ride into puddles of black road and out again.

Less than thirty minutes out of South Bend, the dew is still on the grass and the day has not begun to bake. I ride into one of the puddles

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of shadow, my forearms resting on the handlebars, my mind full of nothing and my legs pumping their own rhythm.

The bike feels as if the back has been jerked straight up and I clutch wildly at the handle bars, but the bike is standing vertical on the front tire, twisting sideways like a bucking horse and I am separated and flicked back-first against the pavement. The road slams the back of my helmet, the air is forced out of my chest, the back wheel of the bike bounces off my forearms and clatters on.

The sky is blue above me and I am too stunned to know if I am even hurt. I have to get to the Imperial Pouch. When I train recruits, I always tell them that, when on a ride, that pouch must be the most important thing in the world. It doesn't matter if it carries a treaty or a shopping list, that's not your concern.

First breath, and I roll over, and scrabble for the bike, the pouch. The pouch is still strapped to the back, and two men in Seventh Army green are sprinting toward me from behind an old gray barn. I pick up the bike but the front wheel is bent out of shape and the handle bars no longer face true forward.

They stretched a fine cord across the way, hidden at this hour in shadow; I can see it now, lying broken. Well, it did the job. No farmer on this road, not close enough to Chicago for any real traffic, and it's late to be going to market anyway.

I strip the pack and pouch off the carrier and run, a rather uninspired reaction, I'm afraid. I look back over my shoulder and they've stopped at the bike. One of them calls, "Messenger!"

His voice comes thin and clear, and I stop.

"Fear God and give him glory!" he calls. "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, that hath made all the nations to drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication!"

There isn't a great deal to answer to that, so I watch and wait. I reach around and touch the back of my shoulder, and my fingers come away bloody. I've scraped my shoulder and my legs, my jersey is ripped. I've left skin on the road. The breeze hurts.

"Babylon was *America!*" the Seventh Son hollers, just in case I didn't get the point.

"You can run, but you cannot hide!" the second Seventh Son shouts. I could tell him that that one isn't in the Bible, even though everyone seems to think it is, but I think it's more prudent to be as uninteresting as possible.

They shout awhile about Babylon, taking turns. They are feeling quite pleased with themselves. A couple of kids, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, who managed to stop an Imperial Messenger. Finally they stop

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shouting at me and pick up my bicycle and trudge toward their barn and disappear around the back.

I need a bicycle and the nearest place to get one is probably South Bend. I watch for awhile; I keep expecting one of my Seventh Sons to pop back out. Imperial Messengers go unarmed, contrary to popular opinion; I have a knife, but it's more useful for repairs and dinner than it is for defense or attack. The two of them have to have some way of watching the road so that they could see me fall.

I can start walking toward Chicago, hope somebody in a wagon comes along and gives me a lift—but I'll be out there just trudging along if one of those two kids decides to pop on his bike and come after me. I can try to flank them, lose most of the day making a wide circle south and walking to the post at South Bend. This is, of course, what I will do. It is the most prudent course of action, although I don't know if the post has a bicycle. It's true that my attackers are just a couple of kids, but who knows what they're armed with. And anger and pride have no place in this profession. The pouch is the most important thing, and weighing the balance between speed and prudence, it seems better to be a day late with the pouch than to either walk back up I-80 and -90 and hope that the two don't chase me—an obviously idiotic choice—or try to see what they're doing. Of course, if I *could* see what they're doing, I might be able to get the bike back. I don't know if I can find anyone who can repair the damage done, but perhaps the post would have a spare front wheel. I could then maybe make the barricades tonight before nightfall.

They *are* only a couple of arrogant kids, after all, and this attitude of theirs, that they can meddle with Imperial business, is not calculated to improve the odds on their seeing their grandchildren. Obviously, they are very stupid.

And I have never, ever, lost a bike in my sixteen years of service. I have broken my arm once and my collar bone twice, I've carried a bike fifty kilometers, but I've never lost one. My trainees will have a field day—not that that should matter in my decision.

I get off I-80 and -90 and kind of creep through the tall grass, approaching the barn from the side. It's not very big, likely used to store feed and hay, or implements.

The grass is yellow and damp in the August morning and smells sweet. The heads are full, like wheat. Chiggers and grasshoppers hum, falling silent when I come near, picking up behind me. The ground is dry and hard, I try to keep the sound of my progress silent. The barn faces me blindly; from here, it appears that there are spaces between the boards you could slide your hand through, and if that is true, those two boys must love sitting there watching an idiot messenger attempting to sneak up on them.

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I crouch for awhile, not fifteen meters from the barn, and wait, resting my pack on the ground. Closer, I can't tell if my cracks are shadows or weathered spots or holes. Boys aren't very patient; I am hoping that if I wait long enough, they will come after me.

They waited long enough to catch me with a snare this morning.

Smoke wisps gently from the barn. I could set fire to the barn. Maybe it's already on fire. The smoke is blue and barely visible as the sun climbs. It's going to be a hot day; why would they be lighting a fire? Breakfast?

I make my way slowly to my left, so as to see the side of the barn facing away from I-80 and -90. The big door is gone, smoke trails thin from the top of the door. I see the taller of the two, the leader who lectured me on Babylon, carefully fanning a fire. He has a couple of boards pulled from the barn, and it appears that he is building a very good-sized fire. Signaling someone? He'll have to blacken the smoke, nobody would see this from very far.

Both of the boys are bare-chested, and my bicycle is tossed on the ground beside them, the twisted wheel turned forlornly upward. If South Bend doesn't have a spare, the only way I'll get *that* bike to the barricades is to carry it. And I'm not carrying a bike 115 kilometers.

The taller boy directs the other to fan the flames. He pulls out his Bible, and his voice comes to me where I crouch in the grass and weeds.

> I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet saying, What thou seest, write in a book.

He is very solemn, a bit hesitant in his reading, but he *can* read, which is something. The other boy, crouched beside him fanning the fire, looks up at him in a strange combination of awe and jitters. My leader, seen from this distance, looks younger than seventeen, maybe fifteen, not more than three years older than my daughter, and I realize I was thrown off by his height.

He puts the Bible down, carefully keeping it open to the pages he wants. It's a Revelations Bible. They're thinner than St. James, but unlike New Harmony Bibles, they're black, not red. He pulls open his pack, the other boy now so intent on what he's doing that he forgets the fire completely.

The taller boy comes up with two plastic bowls, obviously from before the collapse. Babylon may have fallen, but apparently there's no reason not to use her by-products. He has a hand-thrown jug of something, I can't see what it is. He pours the liquid into the two bowls and then pulls out a pouch, the kind people use for tobacco.

He says something to the other boy, who answers. I can hear the nervousness, but not the words. They discuss something for a bit, the

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taller boy getting more vehement, until I hear clearly, "The Throne takes almost the whole bag!"

The other answers him some way that convinces him, and he pours something out of the bag into the two bowls. Then the other remembers the fire and goes back to tending it. The boards are dry and burning fairly well, they don't take much tending.

The tall one surveys the two bowls. Both look nervous, like two boys taking their first drink. After a bit he gives one bowl to the short one, passing it awkwardly, two-handed, as if copying some ceremony. He picks up his own and says, "Revelation!"

The other boy stands up quickly, slopping the contents of his bowl a bit, and says in a voice pitched too high from tension, "Blessed is he that readeth, heareth, keepeth!" Then he looks to the other for his cue. The taller one drinks, stops after a mouthful—clearly not expecting the taste —then gamely drinks the rest of the bowl.

Gingerly, the other takes a taste, grimaces, and swallows again. It takes him awhile, while the taller boy stands staring at the fire, looking a little green around the gills.

They look at each other. Then the taller picks up his Bible and reads:

> Go, take the book which is open in the hand of the angel that standeth upon the sea and upon the earth—

The shorter looks distinctly ill and puts his hand on his stomach and I wait to see if he is going to lose whatever it is that they drank. If it's the stuff that Seventh Sons drink to see visions, it can't be too good early in the morning, particularly for a young, scared boy who may or may not have had any breakfast.

> And I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and when I had eaten it, my belly was made bitter. And they say unto me, thou must prophesy again over many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.

The taller boy puts the book down again and says something to the younger. The younger doesn't do anything for a minute, then he finally goes and picks up my bicycle.

"Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's," the tall one intones, "and render unto God what is God's."

And the younger throws my bike onto the fire.

I crouch in the weeds, watching two kids destroy a bicycle which is the finest product of Imperial engineering. A bicycle worth more than the farms they were born on. They pile more wood on the fire, on top of the bike. It's a metal bike, it won't really burn, but the tires do, pouring off black stinking smoke. They retreat to the back of the barn, fanning the air. Their chests are paler than their faces and hands.

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In sudden consternation, the tall one rushes into the smoke and snatches his Bible, then retreats to the back.

We all sit and watch the fire for awhile. I can't think of anything else I can do. I couldn't save the bike. Now I have the hike back to South Bend, unless I can hitch a ride to Chicago. A mule cart will take me two days. I rode half an hour before getting here, I've a couple of hours' hike back to South Bend. *If* they have a bicycle and *if* I start this afternoon, there is a chance I can make the barricades tonight. But if there's any rough road, or if I have any trouble, I won't. And while they probably have a couple of bikes, I'll be taking someone's. That's not going to make me popular.

Expect the unexpected, I always tell my trainees.

With my record, there's not likely to be any trouble, although bikes like mine don't grow on trees. I might be taken off active rotation for awhile, at least until there's a bike available. If there's no bike available, I may not have to ride again until next spring.

The shorter boy makes a high whining sound.

The taller boy jerks. Something is definitely wrong with both of them; even from here, I can see that the taller boy looks on the verge of hysteria.

The younger boy makes a chesty, coughing sound, and suddenly leans over and vomits. He crouches, head hanging.

The taller boy crouches, too, clutching his Bible. He appears to be shivering, although with a fire going the barn couldn't be at all cold. The sun on my arms and back is hot. The flies are at my back, but I try to keep still.

The shorter boy makes that coughing kind of grunt, and then begins whining. The taller boy doesn't move. The shorter keeps whining; a nasty, animal kind of noise. The smoke stinks less, but now I smell vomit and another, familiar smell it takes me a moment to place, the yeasty smell of beer. Probably the stuff in the jug.

The shorter boy suddenly topples onto his side.

He stays that way, although from here it looks likely that he fell into the vomit. The taller boy does not seem aware.

A bit of wind runs across the grass. The sky is that clear blue that precedes a scorching day, and the field around me is yellow and green. In the green weeds I have chosen to screen myself there is a spray of black-eyed susan. I can feel my legs shaking from the strain of crouching and the after-effects of adrenaline, so I sit slowly and carefully. I don't think the tall boy is really aware of very much at the moment, but I don't have any desire to find out.

The ground is cool, I make it to a sitting position without much movement of the grass—

The tall boy says something.

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My heart starts, but it's not me he's speaking to. His voice sounds odd, as if his tongue were too thick. He starts talking very low, almost a mumble, and as I watch, he gets louder and louder, straightening up, standing up, until he is shouting. It isn't words he's shouting; it's something full of vowels and consonants, m's and b's and things that *sound* like words, but they aren't words. The hair is standing up on the back of my neck, and the way my skin is crawling makes my scraped shoulder throb. He could be looking at me, it's hard to tell. He's shaking, as if he contains something he can't hold, some huge anger or violence. His eyes look white, they've rolled back in his head. His fists rise slowly, coming up to his white, hairless chest, shaking as if he were trying to tell me something with his shouting, his thick words, and his pants suddenly darken and I smell piss.

He falls over like a board, still making thick glottal sounds, and lies there shaking, the sounds disappearing gradually into a kind of "uhnnnn, uhnnn, uhnnn."

Abruptly, he stops.

There is silence in the field, and a sweat bee hovers close to me, seeking to milk the perspiration from my skin.

God in the whirlwind.

I finally bring myself to get up and approach the barn. They look just like boys, their necks and wrists showing rings of dirt where their shirts stop, their hair blunt chopped. The tall one is on his back, and the nipples of his chest are as pink and delicate as those of my twelve year old daughter. I *think* the boys are alive. I should check to see if they are still alive, but I cannot bring myself to touch them. In the barn, I find only the boys, their skinny packs, and their bikes, parked in the back at a place where the boards separate to give a good view of I-80 and -90.

Neither bike is in very good shape, but they've ridden them all over the road, so one will probably get me to Chicago. I cut the tires and strip the rubber off one and wheel the other out of the barn. I cannot stop myself, I keep looking back. They look like children, and yet they've destroyed some very valuable property, and committed treason by assaulting a representative of the Emperor.

Where are their parents? Do they even *have* parents? Are their parents members of the Seventh Army? They couldn't all be, the Seventh Army won't have anything to do with women. Finally, I just walk away.

I walk to the road, heaving the clunky bike over the ditch and over the torn-up pavement. The bike used to be black, and was painted flat green with a regular paint brush and shows the strokes. It has coaster brakes. And no carrier for my pack—the Seventh Army must bicycle with

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their packs on their backs. If they're like those two boys that wouldn't be hard—their packs were too small to carry a change of clothes.

I'm not interested in carrying my pack on my back, so I lash it to the handlebars. It will make the thing even clumsier to steer, but it's the best I can do.

The handlebars aren't true, the chain clicks against the sprocket every time I pedal, and it pedals as if I were pushing through a puddle, but it will get me to Chicago. And that means that I won't have to take a bike that a soldier could use.

I head west.

My job may be obsolete in a few years. A representative from Venezuela has promised the Emperor a plane and technological support in return for the protection of the Imperial Navy within the four lakes of Imperial Territory. They are still negotiating; King Ian of Toronto is feuding with Quebec and he wants a plane as well, and we need Toronto to protect the northern lakes. The purer factions of the Court are not pleased with the idea of doing business with the south. I don't see much difference between our Imperial factories and their profit-driven ones, but the Purists all scream that technology for its own sake breeds corruption; that soon we will have crime, dissolution of family ties, divorce, children making adult decisions, pornography. It would have to be a pretty big plane, to carry all that, and although I've never seen a real plane, from what I understand, these aren't even ten meters long. It's inevitable—the Emperor knows the planes are available, and if he doesn't take one, Seth of Washington will. It is only a matter of time before some settlement is reached, and with a couple of planes, bike messengers won't be needed.

When I get back to Chicago, I should talk to Amy, my wife, about taking that position with the Household of the Governor of Illinois. We would be able to remain in Chicago even though the Seat is in Springfield; the Governor has a house in Chicago, spends most of his time there. I'd be away in Springfield a lot, but I'm away a lot now.

I no longer hear the noise of the chain slapping against the sprocket, keeping pace with me. I ride past Michigan City by noon, I can be through Hammond by four and at the barricades by five. Lord willing and the creek don't rise, I'll be sleeping in a bed tonight.

The road begins to pick up traffic, carts and people on foot and farmers with bikes as rattletrap as the one I'm riding. All bound for the great glittering Chicago. I ache from my fall and the unexpected stress and tensions of this unfamiliar bike. All the landmarks of home—a stand of trees, a familiar silo. I stop in Chesterton, at a little farmer's market, and eat cold stew out of my pack. Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.

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It's not *me* that thought that, but rather a man standing on the back of a cart, who barks it at the crowd. He is not dressed in army green, but he has a wasted seamed look. Of course, Babylon. Every preacher in the Americas must invoke Babylon. His eyes slide across me as he surveys the crowd. People avoid the wagon. I feel the prickle across my back, the skin on my shoulder aches. I am standing here with a bicycle stolen from the Seventh Army, painted Seventh Army green. How can anyone not notice the difference between what an Imperial Messenger usually rides and *this* thing?

Nothing to be done for it now. I finish my stew, although my appetite is gone and my stomach knotted, and think. If I don't leave before too long, that will draw attention; if I *do* get on the bike, that may draw attention, as well. I rinse my mouth and spit, take a drink.

He is singing:

By the waters of Babylon
We lay down and wept, and wept, for thee, Zion.
We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee, Zion.

His voice is cracked. No reason why this man should be a member of the Seventh Army, no reason other than the feeling that my luck is gone. I get on the bike and pedal west, slowly, listening to the chain slap the sprocket, feeling that the bike pedals less well than it seemed to this morning, waiting to hear him cry something behind me. But he just continues singing in an awful, old man's voice, "We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee, Zion."

I make slow time after Chesterton. There is a lot of traffic and the road is wide but rutted and uneven. The bike is not doing too well, either. Something is wrong with the way the front sprocket takes up the chain. I stand on the pedals because the drag is making it hard to keep going, and the chain slips off the sprocket.

Nothing to do but get off, flip the bike and fiddle the chain back on. The teeth are in awful shape—worn and not true. I clean the chain a little and oil it. Four more hours and I can do to this thing what they did to my bike.

After about an hour, the chain slips off again. I take off my pack, set it upside down, clean and replace the chain. It seems to happen if I ride too hard. I only had one person following me yesterday; assuming it was one of the two boys that ambushed me, it was probably the taller one, and this was probably not his bike. Maybe the shorter one caught up later? I should have looked at the bikes more closely, shouldn't have been in such a hurry to get out of there. I should know enough not to get involved, to try to stay as dispassionate as possible. Be objective, I tell the trainees, be disciplined.

So I'll ride slower, make the barricades later. I can sleep there, just

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inside the barricades at the post, report tomorrow morning. I ride carefully, although the chain still slips on me too often.

At a little before six, I stop to put the chain back on the sprocket again. I wanted to be in Hammond by five-thirty or six but I am just outside of Gary. Still, I am so close. The towns I pass are more than just farming towns. I'm close to Chicago. People speak differently; their accents aren't so flat, they say Chicago, speak as if they had some education.

I could commandeer a bike, I have the authority, now that there are bikes worth commandeering, but Hammond is only fifteen kilometers away. From Hammond it's only another seven to the barricades, and Hammond is so close to Chicago it's really as if I were in the city proper. If I didn't have to carry my pack I would park the bike and hike, abandon the damn thing for anyone who wanted to fool with it. I ride through Gary, the city barely thins, and then it's seven and I'm in Hammond.

Last stop, for water and a bite to eat. There's a public tap that has drinkable water, I've filled up here before. The streets are clearing, people are home, eating dinner. I check the chain again, cleaning it and slipping it back on the sprocket, wince as I set the bike back up—my shoulder hurts every time I move the skin—and strap my pack back on. A summer evening. The day is beginning to cool, there's a hint of breeze.

A man standing at the corner begins to sing. "By the waters of Babylon we lay down and wept, and wept, for thee, Zion—"

A street away someone else sings back, "We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee, Zion."

I do not hurry. I make sure the pack is settled solidly and then put the stand up and wheel the bike back out. Am I paranoid? It is a common enough psalm, "Babylon." There is no reason to assume it is a signal. But I have made slow time on a Seventh Army bicycle. If someone has found the boys, assuming one of them was in any condition to talk, they would have had a lot of time to catch up. If someone saw the bicycle, again, they would have all day to chase me as I stopped and put the chain back on the sprocket half-a-dozen times. I should have left the pack and the bike, taken only the pouch and walked. I should have gone back to the post at South Bend.

There is nothing to do but get back on the bike and hope it is all coincidence.

In the center of Hammond, I hear the psalm again, sung behind me. "By the waters of Babylon—"

And answered ahead of me, "We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee—"

Just as the Emperor cannot have Messengers stopped, and the action of those two boys will cause the Army to go out and sweep I-80 and -90, so the Seventh Army cannot have anyone, even Imperial Messengers,

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riding Seventh Army bicycles. It is all a show of dominance. That Imperial Order will dominate in the end is small consolation to someone sacrificed in the fray. I don't think the Seventh Army will give me a chance to explain how I came to be possessed of one of their bikes. If I did explain, there is no reason to assume they would care.

At the edge of Hammond, I glance back; there are four bicyclists behind me, none dressed in Army green, but I have no doubt it is me they are riding after. I am not certain what to do. It's almost eight, the evening is upon us, it will be dark before I get this piece of trash to the barricades. They hang back there, and I pretend not to notice them, hoping for time, for something to happen, for a patrol, someone with a wagon. How can this highway be so empty this close to Chicago? Obvious: because *outside* the barricades, everyone closes themselves up safely before it gets dark.

There is an exit ramp ahead, I could take it and hope that someone in a house will let me in. As soon as I took it, though, they would know that I knew they were behind me. So I decide to continue and hope someone comes along the highway.

The chain comes off the sprocket.

I cannot stop, no doubt they would take that as divine providence, a sign that I have been made helpless. The exit is a smooth downgrade, I take it and coast, letting the bike pick up as much speed as it will. The old sign for the ramp is gone, and there is no Imperial replacement, which is odd, since the way is well-traveled. At the base of the ramp, I finally see something that tells me where I am—you would think I would remember what is just this side of Hammond.

Calumet City.

My wife will *love* this.

I can't accelerate the bicycle, I can only coast. At the bottom of the downgrade, I turn north, right, to follow the path, and then turn off it, and run the bicycle bumpily over the grass for a few feet. When the bike runs out of momentum (which doesn't take long) I pull off my pack. I'd like to hide the bike, but there's no bush, just grass. So I throw the bike down in the grass and ignominiously run. When I look back, they are stopping their bikes, pointing.

Prairie doesn't provide much cover, but it's not efficient to ride a bike across it and at least we are on equal footing. I begin to head diagonally north and west, hoping to run into Calumet City. There are buildings there, gutted, some burned-out cinder-block shells. They are fairly far apart, spaced along roads that haven't been there for years; the blackened scars of fires are old, the roofs are gone and the grass grows inside and out. I try to cut between them, putting obstacles in my pursuers' line of sight. Sometimes when I run, I have this light and easy feeling, as if my

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feet can do no wrong. Uneven ground doesn't slow me, I don't seem to stumble. Fear does that, and I run easily at first. Then the ground seems to develop hillocks and snags and I stumble more and more.

I keep trying to head northwest, run on a bit of road until that peters out, cut west again, finally running back far enough to strike the main road from I-80 and -90. When I was a kid, I discovered that if I just kept running, people who were probably faster than I was eventually gave out. Getting a head start is half the battle, so I became the kid that could run forever. For the last fifteen years I've competed in the Messenger Corps long-distance rides, leaving the sprints to others, trying to be the man who can ride forever. Surely I can outrun four Seventh Sons, if I *just keep going.* If they aren't fresh. My pulse pounds in my temples and in the torn skin of my shoulder.

At least I am certain that the Seventh Army isn't any more familiar with Calumet City than I am.

First there are houses, often with lights but closed up tight, and I am afraid to stop. Somewhere, I know, Calumet City is awake, and there are people who may not be particularly impressed by an Imperial Messenger, but who will be even less impressed by a Seventh Son.

I walk a bit, trying to get my breath, until I think I hear my pursuers and run again.

At least it is easier running on the road; as long as they haven't had the sense to send someone along the road on a bicycle, I ought to be all right.

The white clapboard houses become shops, mostly with old rusted grates covering their front windows. I jog along. A street left, and lights spill into the evening. People are in the street, crossing the wide dirt thoroughfare to bars on each side: *Hot Pussycat, The Brass Ass, Sexy Sadie's, The Crazy Horse.* Men in badly made longcoats stand in the doorways, eyeing me and the others on the street. I am probably standing in the only place in the Americas where an Imperial Messenger on foot in a shredded and filthy uniform excites no comment.

I walk down the street, stop at *The Brass Ass* under a hanging kerosene lantern that illuminates a sign that shows a naked woman's behind with a donkey's tail. The man in the doorway is wearing a Lavinger longcoat and a tri-corner with an exaggerated downcurved back, so long it brushes the collar of his longcoat. He has stringy long black hair, and when he smiles at me he has dreadful teeth. "Sir," he says, "girls you can't *imagine!* The most beautiful girls in the Americas, performing on stage, here at *The Brass Ass,* only a two drink minimum per show and the shows go on all night, we have Teresa La Tit from Quebec, beautiful as only the French are, and Lana Lust from New York, six foot of beautiful blond, won't touch a man she doesn't love and never met a man she couldn't

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find love in, come on in, have a peek, see what you like, sir, we have girls from all over the world—"

I brush past him; this seems like the best place to hide from the Seventh Army this side of the barricades, inside a place called *The Brass Ass* in infamous Calumet City. I'm a Christian man and I don't touch drink stronger than beer, and, believe me, I have never, ever betrayed Amy, but I hope that she and God will understand what brings me here. I swore an oath to my Emperor that I would do anything within the power of my body to fulfill my task, and if that oath takes me even to *The Brass Ass,* well, so be it.

And honestly, although what I'd really like more than anything else at this moment is to be home, I must admit to some curiosity about these places. I mean, I've *heard,* but I've never been, and I probably never will be again. This is a chance to see something, and it's going to be a great distraction at the Corps when they start harassing me about how I lost my bicycle.

I don't know what I expected, red velvet drapes I suppose, little lamps with fringe on them, not this dark place like a restaurant, with a long counter on one side like a wooden lunch counter with stools, the bar, I suppose, and a stage at the front where a woman wearing string underwear with a few patches of cloth and crochet lace covering her from her neck to her feet dances all by herself. She does have a rather full chest, not well restrained by the strings and crochet. All across her chest and belly and hips, I can see how the strings and threads of the crochet are leaving red lines on her skin. I have seen a woman naked, I am a married man and, well, I've seen women, but the effect isn't what I would have expected. I'm somewhat embarrassed to look at her, as if she were deformed and I were staring.

A woman in a dress that mimics Court dress except that it's more like a theater dress, not as complicated as the real thing, says at my elbow, "Sir, would you like a seat at the bar?"

A hostess, I suppose. I nod and she directs me to a seat but then sits down next to me. "I'm Isabel," she says in an odd, breathy voice so Isabel sounds like "Is a ball." Her dress is pink, and the skirt is cut up the sides. You don't see it when she is standing, it looks just like a regular dress, but when she sits down, it falls away from her legs. She's wearing the crochet business, too, only it's not so tight on her. Then she takes off her jacket and her dress only covers about half of her breasts. She takes a deep breath and kind of, ah, shoves them at me, and, so help me, puts her hand on my leg. "Would you buy me a drink?"

I'm so flustered I say, "Why?"

She laughs this kind of deep chuckle and says, "So we can talk, sir."

I have traveling money, but I don't know about spending it on this

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kind of thing. I have to buy two drinks, to pay for being here. "How much is a drink?" I ask.

"$2.50," she says.

"I can't spend $7.50 on drinks!" I say.

She has pink on her cheeks and lips, rather flattering, but she has rabbity teeth and a kind of thin pinched face, she's not as pretty as I thought she was at first.

The woman on the stage swings her hips in lazy circles. She looks so bored. I realize the place is nearly empty. You'd think, for practice or good theater or something, she would at least pretend that more than three people were watching her.

Isabel slides off the stool and walks away without another word.

The man behind the counter says, "Two drink minimum, what'll you have?"

"Something cool?" I ask.

"Beer?" he asks.

"I don't know, something like cider, iced tea?"

"Got iced tea. Drink or beverage?"

"What's the difference?"

"Drink has alcohol," he says, "beverage doesn't."

"Beverage," I say. I put my pack on the bar and dig out five dollar coins. Another girl, this one in red and black, sits down beside me and her dress falls away from her legs.

"I'm Scarlet, are you really a messenger?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

"What happened to you?"

"I had some trouble with the Seventh Army and my bicycle broke down," I say.

Her mouth makes a silent, round O. Her lips are an unnatural red, her cheeks are dusted with streaks of red powder. Her straight hair is artificial yellow, except at her scalp, where it is darker. Under the red powder, she has acne scars.

"Want to buy me a drink?" she asks.

"No," I say.

She puts her hand on my leg. "Ah, come on, I really want to talk to you." She does this funny thing of lowering her head, like a shy colt. "I never met a messenger before."

"You can talk to me," I say.

"The manager will get real mad if I sit with you and you don't buy me a drink." She pouts like a child, which irritates me. I hate when women act like children. Then she touches me, which makes me start.

"Sorry," I snap, taking her hand out of my lap. "I've been assaulted by

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members of the Seventh Army, who chased me into Calumet City, I've been on the road over a week, I need a bath, and I'm a married man."

"We can arrange for a bath," she says, batting her eyes. I've heard that phrase before, "batting her eyes," but I think that this is the first time I've ever actually seen it, and it looks silly.

"Won't your manager be upset?" I say.

"A bath is ten dollars," she says matter of factly.

"I'll pass," I say.

"Okay," she says.

I expect her to get angry or something, but it's more as if she forgets I'm there. She just gets off the stool and wanders away. I look at the waiter, perplexed, but he doesn't seem to find anything odd going on. I sip my $2.50 iced tea. It's bitter, like it's stood too long.

"Is there a place I can sleep around here?" I ask.

He gestures upstairs.

"How about alone?" I ask.

"Down the street," he says.

I have this feeling that I might as well sit and get my five dollars worth. Now that I am sitting, I am so tired I can barely straighten up. I ache. I wish I'd taken a table, at least the chairs have backs. I watch the girl on stage dancing to the rendition of a song I almost recognize, beaten out of an ancient upright piano. The music stops, she walks to the end of the stage and steps down. She's barefoot except for the crochet stockings. Another girl passes her, steps onto the stage. It's Isabel—she's taken off her pink dress and is wearing pink string underwear under her crochet lace. Dressed, I thought she was in her twenties; undressed, she looks older, soft under the arms and at the elbows and knees. I feel sorry for her, which surely is not the feeling she hopes to arouse. My back feels hot, feverish. I watch her dance—if anything so lackluster can truly be called dancing—out of inertia. This is a sad place.

Scarlet, the blond, comes winding back through the tables with a middle-aged man in tow. I foresee trouble.

"Messenger?" the man says, "I'm Tom O'Brien, I'm the Manager here."

I nod. "Sir," I say. He looks a bit like a shopkeeper, even if he is wearing a formal suit.

"Scarlet tells me you came in here to escape the Seventh Army?" He has allergies, his eyes are red and watery.

"Yes. I had bicycle trouble at your exit on I-80 and -90."

"Did they follow you into town, sir?" he asks mournfully.

"They followed me, I don't know how far they came."

"Ben, did the Messenger here pay for his drinks?"

"He did, Tom," the waiter says.

"Give him his money back. Messenger," he says dolefully, "it may

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surprise you, but I consider myself loyal to the Emperor, and any service I can render you I'll be more than happy to provide."

It does surprise me. "I am very grateful, Mr. O'Brien, and I'll be certain to mention you favorably in any reports I might make."

"Can we put you up, sir?"

"Your man here," I indicate the waiter, "tells me there's an inn or a hotel down the street where I might put up?"

"Royal's, yes, sir. It's not posh, but the sheets are clean and you'll probably be more comfortable there than you would here, although you're more than welcome to stay."

"No, thank you," I say, thinking of clean sheets.

"Let me offer you some supper? It's too early for our kitchen staff to have much prepared but we have chili and sandwiches."

It must be getting on to nine, what time do they eat dinner? "That would be wonderful," I say.

Scarlet brings me chili and a ham sandwich on thick white china. It's tasty food, and I find I'm hungry. To my surprise, she stays to talk, settling on the stool next to me and asking, "Where did you go?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I mean you said you've been riding for a week. Where to?"

"Actually, I've been gone for six weeks. I'm just back from Washington."

"I'm from the south," she says.

"Where from?" I ask.

"I usually tell people Atlanta, but I'm actually from Louisville. But we left when I was a little girl. Is Washington pretty?"

"Some places," I say. "They're trying to repair the old Capitol building. Won't you get in trouble talking to me?"

"No," she shrugs, "there's nobody else in the club. If there were people here, I should be working, but we usually aren't too busy on a Tuesday night." She's a different person, not so many artificial gestures, although she still has this little girl voice.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Teller," I say.

"That's your first name?" she asks.

I don't usually like to give my name on the road. It's hard to explain, but I like to keep that separate. "Just Teller is fine," I say.

"My name is Martha," she says, "but everybody calls me Marty."

"Why did you tell me your name was Scarlet?" I ask.

"That's just work," she says. I can understand that.

She prattles on about going to Washington and tells me how she and her uncle and her big sister walked to Cincinnati and then to Indianapolis. She doesn't explain how she got from Indianapolis to Calumet City,

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and I don't ask. She doesn't come out and say so, but I gather that her uncle was a farmhand. Under all the red paint, she has the pale color and angular look of poor country people, someone who grew up on beans, corn bread, and greens. I am so tired, her words run together. On stage, a different girl is shaking her torso to the music. I can't imagine why they do it that way, she has the same matter-of-fact air she might have if she were shucking corn or wringing out laundry. The light makes hard-edged shadows on her face.

"I've got to get some sleep," I tell Scarlet, or Marty or whoever.

"Okay, it was nice talking to you," she says. "Are you really married?"

"Yes," I say.

"Why don't you wear a wedding ring?"

"We're not allowed to wear any symbol of allegiance to anything or anyone except the Emperor when we ride," I explain.

"What about a cross, could you wear one?"

"Yes," I nod, getting off the stool. "We're allowed a cross, but we don't."

"Why not?" She's very interested in this.

"It's a tradition of the Corps," I say.

"Would it be against the rules for you to sleep with me?" she asks matter-of-factly.

I lie. "Yes."

"How about drink? Can't you drink?"

"We're not supposed to on duty."

"You haven't had a drink in six weeks?"

"No," I say. I smile, "I probably haven't had a drink since Christmas. We're not drinking people, we Tellers."

"Are you Purists?"

"No, we just don't drink. We're boring people."

"I don't think going to Washington is boring," she says, and then she smiles to let me escape. "Good night, Teller."

"Good night, Marty."

It's dark on the street. I look for Seventh Sons, but the street is mostly empty. A girl in a short dress, not like any of the girls' dresses from *The Brass Ass*, stands talking to a man in a farmer's longcoat, shiny black with age. She puts her arms around him and he tries to back off but she puts her hand in his crotch and grips him as if weighing his heft. Her dress has thin straps and her breasts hang unsupported in the loose chest. She glances past her farmer and sees me, but doesn't seem to care what I see.

He backs away, and she looks tired in the spill of light, then puts on this grotesque expression, a kind of leer, which I suppose is expected to be alluring. The man hesitates and I hear his voice, low and clear in the street, "Take it out."

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She shrugs off a strap and cups her exposed breast. They aren't that far away, I can see the dark aureole and the way her skin pales where it is covered by the dress. I need to pass them to go to the Royal, but I don't want to pass until they finish their transaction and go wherever it is they're going to go, so I turn away, walk back down the street, past the men in the doorways who sing out about their respective places, "Two drink minimum, like America before the fall, Tina Bambina from Mexico, altered by surgery, perfect full breasts, fifty full inches, just like the twentieth century—" "Sir, the daughter of the Don of Houston, from his famous harem, escaped over the wall, as beautiful as any woman you'll ever see, two drink minimum—" and even "Five of the most beautiful boys you'll ever see, see if you can tell where the reality ends and illusion begins—"

I stop and relieve myself. I'm going to walk back and I don't care if they're copulating in the street, I'm going to go somewhere I can get some sleep.

I hear someone and start to turn, not even thinking of anything, and someone grabs my neck and slams my face into the building, and then pulls me back and does it again. I fall to my hands and knees and grab for my pack, for the Imperial pouch, and something heavy hits me in the ribs and I curl up. Feet running away.

"Teller," Marty says, "What the hell are you doing to yourself?" Her voice is pure Kentucky.

"Somebody just robbed me." I touch my nose with the heel of my hand, it's still bleeding. "I need to talk to the manager."

She puts her hands on her hips. "He and a couple of the other guys from the street have gone out to find your Seventh Army. Let me get some water."

"Marty," I say, "I have to get that pack, the Imperial pouch is in it. The Emperor will burn this place down if he thinks somebody in Calumet City was obstructing an Imperial Messenger."

"Well, if they're going to burn the place down, I probably shouldn't worry about the mess you're making, but I don't think Tom is going to like you bleedin' all over the club. Come on." She takes me back into the kitchen, a brightly lit place with clean, whitewashed walls.

A huge, flat-faced woman is cooking, the short sleeves of her dress binding the doughy flesh of her arms. "I thought we was done with Imperial Messengers," she says darkly to Marty.

"I did, too," Marty says. "For a man I ain't slept with, you're a hell of a lot of trouble, you know that? What happened?"

I tell her. She's not trying to entertain me anymore. I recognized the

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"buy me a drink" bit as a performance, but all the prattle about Washington seemed real—yet here is another face. She starts to clean me up, and I take the cloth from her. She's a hard tiny little thing, and I don't want her touching me. I find myself thinking of the woman in the street, hauling herself out of her dress for sale. I try to think of something else, and the two boys in the barn come back to me. I wonder if they're alive. It seems as if all that happened long ago. I've lost an Imperial pouch. I should have gone back to South Bend. I should have gone directly to the Royal. I should have chosen the other bicycle.

"I've got to find that pouch," I say.

"Oh, screw your damn pouch!" Marty says. "You can't very well go back out on your own, can you? What kind of idiot would go wandering around in the dark, anyway? I don't know how you managed to make it to adulthood. If I was as stupid as you, I'd be dead as my uncle. Men are always so stupid."

The other girls keep coming through the kitchen, asking questions, staring at me, while I hold a cold rag to my nose. My head aches and my stomach is queasy.

"Somebody rolled you for your money," Isabel says.

"The Emperor will burn this city down if I don't get that pouch back," I say.

"Why don't you just tell him there was no answer?" Isabel says.

"Because I have to hand in the empty pouch."

"You know he can't even wear a wedding ring? It's not *allowed*," Marty says.

"You can't get married? I thought you said he was married."

"Look," I say, "I've got to go back to where they got it and see if there's anything there. Is there anyone who can go with me?"

"Oh, shit," Marty says. "All right, get your ass outta the chair and we'll go look for your precious pouch."

Her language shocks me. Farmers swear all the time, it's not that I never hear it, or even that I don't swear once in awhile myself, it's just that young girls don't. Of course, I don't know any prostitutes. "No, you can't go," I say.

"Why the hell not," she says.

"Well, the person who jumped me is out there. Maybe the guy who sells drinks?"

"Ben has to stay on the premises when Tom isn't here, and I can take care of myself a sight better than you seem to be able to, Messenger."

She doesn't come much above my shoulder. If it were the cook it would be different. But I have to go back out and look, and my head is ringing, and I just don't care enough to argue.

First thing she says, "Royal's is the other way."

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"I know," I say.

"Then why were you walking this way?"

"I didn't want to interrupt a business transaction," I say.

She looks at me, her face washed in yellow light from the sign, which makes her hair look green and her skin jaundiced.

"A man and a woman were, ah, negotiating in the middle of the street."

"So you walked the other way. How old are you, anyway?"

"Thirty-four," I say.

"I've known sixteen year old kids smarter than you," she says.

"Look," I say, "I don't like you any better than you like me. Why don't you just go on back and I'll take care of this myself. I didn't ask you to be my babysitter."

"I know you don't like me," she says. "You think you're being real nice to a little whore, being real polite and all, actually *speaking* to her. I just like rubbing you the wrong way."

No sense in answering. There are more people out and about now, although still not a lot. We walk down the dusty street to the place where I stopped. I start looking, but there's nothing to see. I suspect whoever took my pack isn't interested in my blanket and gear. I don't think it was a Seventh Son, they wouldn't have been interested in robbery, I'd always thought they prided themselves on not possessing very much. I just hope that whoever it was didn't know what an Imperial pouch was and dropped it.

Nothing. We search up and down the little alley and a bit on the road behind the building and don't find anything.

"Who did you see in the street?" Marty asks.

"A farmer and a woman."

"What did she look like?"

"Brown hair. Maybe forty, although the light wasn't good. She was wearing a short dress with skinny straps."

"Blue shiny dress? With a big guy in a black coat?"

I stop. "Yes. You know her?"

"It's a small town. I think I know who has your things."

I hear someone shout. And then a couple of people shouting and the crack of a gun. Marty looks, her face turned away from me, her body stiff with listening.

"Is that normal?" I ask.

"No," she says, "wait here." She starts to run.

"Hey!" I shout.

But she doesn't stop, runs around the corner and turns away from the direction we'd take to get back to *The Brass Ass*.

She thinks she knows who has my pouch, so I try to run after her, holding my side where I was kicked in the ribs. She's wearing shoes with

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heels about two inches high and straps around the ankles; they don't look like they'd be good to run in, and she has this funny way of running up on her toes, but she makes good time. I don't run so well by this point, and I have to keep forcing myself to go faster to keep her in sight.

She goes deeper into town, beyond the street with *The Brass Ass* on it, stopping once—I almost catch up to her—until she hears another gun shot. They're coming at steady intervals. The street she turns up has big houses on it, trees hanging over the road. People are standing on porches, mostly women, but a few men as well. She cuts across another street, full of closed-up shops, and cuts across the empty lot of, so help me, a bowling alley—I know, I've seen the one in Chicago, although I've never been inside—running, drawn on by the sound of shooting.

She goes around the corner; I follow her around, and something grabs my legs and knocks me down.

So help me, my first thought is, "All right, kill me."

There are a great number of stars in the sky. Not as many as there are when I'm out in the middle of nowhere, but still a respectable number. I roll onto my side because my back hurts, and because if I am going to be sick, I think it would be better if I were on my side. There is the *crack,* very close, of a rifle.

"We found your Seventh Army," someone says.

I am delighted.

"Marty," a man says, "do you think you could go tell Sam to round up a couple more guys?"

"Sure. Oh, I gotta tell you, Nettie rolled the Messenger, got his pack and his message pouch." She reports this lightly.

The response is general laughter, four or five voices. I wonder darkly how funny it will seem to them when Imperial troops torch this goddamned little town. Part of me recognizes that these men are nervous, and that the laughter is a reaction to tension. Part of me doesn't care.

I sit up finally. There's a wall in front of me which turns out to be a mule cart on its side. I feel very sick.

"Messenger? Are you okay?" It's Tom, the Manager, I can recognize his voice. In the darkness, he smells of sweat and a strange, sweet odor. Some kind of cologne. My stomach heaves again.

"Fine," I manage.

"We'll get your stuff back," he says, "don't worry."

I can see the black silhouette of a man with a rifle; he says to Marty, "Wait just a minute." He shoots over the side of the mule cart, fires a second time. "Okay, go." She runs, back the way we came, and he fires again. "Goddamn Jesus freaks."

"Where are they?" I ask.

"In Tucker's, on the corner. He don't use that building, and they musta

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pried one of the boards off a window. We wouldn't have found 'em if we didn't catch one of them crawling back in." It's the man with the rifle.

"Do they have any guns?"

"One," he says, "but they don't seem to have much ammunition for it. They use it sparing."

"So what are you going to do?"

Nobody says anything. Finally one of the men says, "You got any ideas, Messenger?"

The only thing I can think of is to set fire to the building, and in August, with everything so dry, it would spread to the buildings next to it. Not that, at this moment, it would bother me if Calumet City burned to the ground. "No," I say.

"If we can't get them out of there, we'll just have to wait until morning," the guy with the rifle says.

"I don't relish going in after them," another remarks.

I don't either. We sit in silence for awhile, the man with the rifle fires. To keep them inside, I suppose.

"What if they go out the back?" I ask.

"No windows in back," says the guy with the rifle. "But Bob and Terry are back there watching."

I'm stuck on the idea of fire, I can't get it out of my head. Something to force them out. I can't think of any other way to force them out. And there's no reason they'd want to come out, except maybe to sneak away, which I suspect they'll do before too long. They can't like their position any better than we do.

I try to think of reasons why they'd come out. The end of the world. An angel of God telling them to. The Seventh Army taking over Calumet City and turning it into a place of worship.

I put my head on my knees and close my eyes.

I must doze, because I dream of the Seventh Army creeping around us, of someone whispering about Babylon in my ear, and startle awake to the sound of a shot, coming at us.

"This is fine," someone says in disgust. Marty's reinforcements. "And just how do you propose to get them out?"

And it comes to me, like that.

The smell of kerosene is pungent in the air; I wonder if they can smell it over across the street. My stomach protests again. I begin to shiver, I'm cold. Maybe running a bit of fever. Sure, and my plan is a fever dream, and maybe Calumet City is a fever dream, too. God in the whirlwind. God sent me my plan. I rest my head against my knees, and see behind my eyelids starbursts of light. I can feel my knees, I get up and walk around the corner to the bowling alley, it's pretty far from home,

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but at least I'm in Chicago and so I'll walk and Amy will be waiting, I just hope she isn't worried, except I can't remember how to get to Morning Glory, which is the street I live on, I know Chicago like the back of my hand, and Amy will be frantic—

I jerk awake, they are standing around Lewis—that's the man with the rifle—and I stand as well. It is Lewis who took my idea and made it a plan. Who convinced the others who came and spread them up and down the street, who worked out all the details.

Lewis whispers, "Ready?" A flicker of flame, he lights the rag wick of a bottle, lets it get good and caught, his face lit from below, and the flame is almost too bright. Excitement makes him grin, and his face is sharp with bright and shadow.

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon!" he screams, and lobs the bottle around the corner to the mule cart. Two of ours run from the mule cart as if they saw the bottle coming, shouting. The bottle shatters, and the mule cart flares spectacularly to light and men standing beside me scream and yell as if in mortal agony. It seems to me that they overdo, enjoying their theatricality, screaming too long. Lewis fires the rifle into the air, and we move away, shouting, and try to mimic the sounds of a fight. Mark, young and agile, runs across the street, as if running from someone. I wait, with my shoulders tight, expecting a shot, but it never comes. Others shout, "Babylon! Babylon!" until Lewis, our director, shushes them all.

There is silence, and only the sound of flames.

Then, as I told him to, Lewis sings, "By the waters of Babylon, we lay down and wept, and wept, for thee, Zion . . . "

Silence. The crackle of flames and the acrid smell of smoke. Maybe we waited too long and they have already left, maybe the code is wrong. I imagine Mark crouched out there somewhere, listening, and Bob and Terry. Maybe the Seventh Army killed them, snuck out, slid out of town. Maybe this has all been for nothing.

Then a man's voice answers, "We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee, Zion."

Flames crackle as the mule cart burns. The smoke stinks of creosote burning.

"Is that Caleb?" calls a voice from the building.

"No," Lewis calls, "Joseph. We're up from Kansas, looking to work here in Illinois."

Silence. Then, "How'd you get here?"

Lewis looks at me.

"The angel appeared and said to me, eat this book," I hiss.

He repeats it.

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"It shall be like honey in your mouth and bitter in your stomach." I can't remember the verse exactly, I can only hope this is good enough.

"Tell him you dreamed you walked north, and came to a holy land," I say.

He does, and adds, "In my dream, I followed a mockingbird that spoke in all the voices of man and beast, and it led me to a place where you could see a battle had been, all the ground tore up. And when we came here, I heard a mockingbird singing his changes by the road at the turnoff, so I knew we had to turn here."

It sounds wrong to me. What's so holy about mockingbirds? It seems it would have been some other animal.

But Lewis doesn't give them a chance to think much about mockingbirds. "Who are you?" he calls. "Show yourselves!"

"David," the man calls back, "of the Church of Laodicea. You show yourselves."

He is suspicious. Not that I blame him, it seemed a beautiful idea to convince them we had been routed by the Seventh Army, but in the doing it seems about as convincing as a middle-school play.

"What are you doing in this hole of iniquity?" Lewis hollers back. Men around me snicker in the darkness. My nerves are jangled.

"An infidel has stolen a bicycle."

"You came here because of a stolen *bicycle?*" Lewis drips with contempt. "Who are you? Come out in the street where we can see you. Hurry up, they'll be coming back."

Too much, they won't buy it. No doubt we've said the wrong things, we didn't say what Church we belonged to, whatever that is, all this stuff about mockingbirds and angels. There probably aren't even Seventh Sons in Kansas.

Silence.

What are they doing in the dark of that house? No doubt talking among themselves. Are there four of them? Did they leave one man with the bicycles?

Lewis crouches at the corner of the building, rifle ready.

I can't see anything.

"They're coming out," Lewis hisses. "One, the second, the third. Didn't you say there were four?"

"One might be with the bicycles," I say.

"Is that all of you?" Lewis calls.

"Show yourself," someone calls back.

"Okay," Lewis says conversationally, "let's satisfy the man," and leans around the corner and shoots.

From up and down the street I hear shouts, Lewis shoots three times in rapid succession, swears, and then they all start running around the

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corner. I come around the corner, see a man crumpled in the street, men running, two knots of activity.

Three men climb into the Tucker building, I keep expecting something to happen, but it doesn't, they just pop their heads out and say, "All clear!"

Men whoop. There are maybe twenty of us, and three Seventh Sons.

Lewis prods the one in the street with the toe of his boot and the man groans. Lewis turns him over with his foot, and I see the man's hands, black in the bit of light from the fire, grab at Lewis' boot. His whole front is black, the road is black underneath him.

"He's done in," Lewis says, sounding uncertain.

"Somebody ought to put him out of his misery."

Lewis nods. He swings the rifle toward the man, the muzzle wavers a bit. The man moves his hands, twists his head and moans, and Lewis startles like a cat, then jerks the rifle up and shoots the man in the face.

I turn around and throw up.

Men are dispatched to collect the fourth Seventh Son, the one with the bicycles, two men stay with the body and the rest of us head back for *The Brass Ass* with the last two Seventh Sons. Nobody seems to have the slightest idea what to do with them, so they are bound. They're bearded young men, frightened nearly out of their minds. One of them tries to sing when we first start walking, "Blessed are they that are perfect in the way, who walk in the law of Jehovah. Blessed are they that keep his testimonies—"

Someone says, "Shut up."

I see the whites of the man's eyes roll. He shuts up. I imagine they see themselves as martyrs, but to me it is only sordid. Is all martyrdom like this? When Peter was hung upsidedown on the cross, did it have this same strain of ugliness and insanity? What would I think if someone requested a more brutal way of death?

I'm tired, and the skin of my shoulder is hot to touch. The fever I'm probably running would certainly color the way things seem.

We do not march triumphantly in, but the girls are excited. They start chattering as soon as we get there, asking what happened, where are all the Seventh Sons?

"Lewis shot one, we captured these two."

The girls look at Lewis. "He was wounded," Lewis says, "I finished him off."

It sets him apart, to take responsibility for a death. Isabel brings him a whiskey, and she and the heavy one find excuses to touch him, take his coat or hand him a sandwich. He remains grave, lets them take his

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coat, takes the whiskey with the dignity of a man who has done something difficult but who has no need to talk about it. Marty corners Tom, I can see them sitting. But the others start describing what happened, remembering events. They get transformed while telling. Rather like hunting; when it's going on it just happens; after it is over, then the outlines become clear. "Three of us chasing this guy, him running like a rabbit, then around the corner comes Pete, see, 'cause Lewis had a couple of people up the street and a couple down, knowing they'd run."

Nobody looks at the two prisoners, tied in chairs. In the stories, the number of Seventh Sons multiplies. If they were chasing one, and another went the other way, but someone else was chasing one up the street, and he says one went around somebody's store—no, someone else says, nobody went that way— "Sure they did," he says, "I was there, wasn't I? I know what I was chasing, don't I?"

From three young men, holed up in a building and badly out-numbered, there has sprung a legion of khaki-clad lunatics. The men in the streets seem impossible to reconcile with these two scared, dirty men.

Finally, to everyone's relief, they are locked in a storeroom. And when the party sent to round up the one left to guard the bicycles returns empty-handed, there is a general sense of relief, although that means one is still wandering around out there. And since there seemed to be so many at what is now referred to as "The Ambush," there may be more. There's even talk of establishing a patrol, to keep the street safe for business.

"Messenger," Lewis says, "we have to go get your things."

I see grins all around. The erstwhile members of the patrol proclaim this their first duty.

Lewis is in charge, but there are twelve, maybe fifteen of us that troop down the street to a bar that doesn't have a sign, an ugly place next to a brick building closed up tight. Lewis doesn't go in the bar, he stands outside and looks up at the window over the place and hollers, "Nettie? I gotta talk to you."

"What if she ain't here?"

"Where the hell else she going to be?"

"Nettie!" he calls again, "you wouldn't want me to come up there looking for you, would you?"

After a moment the woman leans out of the window. "Whaddya want," she says. "I'm *working*, Lewis."

"You got your farmer in there? What's he got to pay you with?" Lewis asks.

Everybody around me laughs. Nettie jerks on the strap of her dress, angry. "Screw you, Lewis."

"No thanks, Nettie, I don't pay for mine."

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More laughter.

She looks at everybody, her eyes skipping nervously. I suppose she can see me well enough in the dark to know why they're here.

"You haven't seen this gentleman's gear, have you?" Lewis calls up, good-naturedly. Hoots and cat-calls.

"I haven't seen nothing," she says belligerently, "now I'm working, leave me alone."

"Come on Nettie, I don't want to have to come up and look in your room. This man is an Imperial Messenger, that's Imperial property," Lewis cajoles her, "You don't want trouble with soldiers now, do you?"

"I don't have nothing," she says.

"I don't *want* to come in," Lewis says, "but if I *have* to . . . " He starts toward the door of the bar.

"Don't you come in!" she screeches, "I'm working, you hear me? You can't come in when I'm working!"

"Just throw the stuff down, okay?"

"I don't have nothing!"

"Come on. We don't want to bother you, Nettie. Hell, nobody in his right mind wants to come in your room."

More laughter. Somebody barks like a dog.

"Goddamn you, Lewis! Why can't you leave me alone! Just because somebody stole this guy's things, what makes you think *I've* got it! You can't treat people this way, it ain't fair! You just leave me alone, let me work!" She keeps talking, repeating herself a lot.

He lets her talk awhile, then finally interrupts her, "Nettie, I've had enough, I'm coming up."

She shrieks and disappears.

"You going *up* there?" someone asks, dismayed.

Lewis holds his hand up, wait.

"Nettie?" he calls.

Nothing.

"Nettie!" more firmly.

She comes to the window and heaves my pack out into the street.

General laughter. "Not bad, Lewis." "He's got a way with the ladies, don't you know?"

I check the pack. The Imperial pouch has been pulled out of the straps and stuck inside, the seal is broken.

"Everything there?" Lewis asks me. "Money?"

"The money doesn't matter," I say. I haul the pack over to the light from the bar, sit down on the step and open the pouch. I've carried Imperial pouches for more than fifteen years, this is the first time I've ever seen the inside of one. There's just one letter, from Seth the Wise,

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not very long. It's still sealed. Hard to believe that I've spent so much time and effort for this. I'm sure it will contain a page of polite phrases.

"It's here," I say.

"What's that?" one of them asks me.

"It's a letter from the King of Washington to the Emperor of Chicago," I say.

That silences them, and they look at the page with awe.

"Shit," someone says, "Nettie had *that?*"

"Hell," Lewis says, "Nettie can't read. What a waste."

It is decided that the best solution to the problem of what to do with the Seventh Sons is to deliver them, with me, to the Imperial Army at the barricades. For which reason the newly established Calumet City Militia borrows a wagon and two mules. At three in the morning, we set off for the edge of the great capital of Chicago, less than five miles away.

The wagon lurches up to the road. I ache at every shake. The night seems full of people, I see shapes out of the corner of my eye. But there is no problem on our ride. We do astonish the guards on duty at the barricade, the Chicago wall, made of a mixture of concrete, block, mortar, and pieces of old, pre-collapse junk. Rusted metal sticks out of the wall at odd angles.

"I'm an Imperial Messenger, carrying a dispatch for the Emperor," I explain. "Wake up Richter, if he's on duty."

Colonel Richter is on rotation, and comes out of the watch house tucking his undershirt into his uniform pants. "Paul Teller?" he says in astonishment. "What happened to you? Where's your bicycle?" He turns on the Calumet City people with suspicion.

They stare back at him, the men in their suits and longcoats, Marty in her red-and-black sitting next to Tom, Isabel and a girl from Sexy Sadie's sitting next to Lewis. The two Seventh Sons sit in the very end of the wagon, tied back to back.

"These good people from Calumet City have captured the men who assaulted me and brought us all here," I say, and smile up at them.

There are no answering smiles. They look impassively at me, at Richter and the four guardsmen, at the wall that keeps them outside.

"Take them," Richter says, and the two Seventh Sons are hauled out of the wagon. None of the Calumet City people make a move to help. I tell myself that they are not people with whom I'd associate under the usual circumstances. Why should I care if they like me? Better that they don't like me; that's all outside the wall—I am inside the wall, where there are some standards, where there is order.

"I'll mention the service Calumet City did the Emperor in my report," I tell them.

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"Thank you, Messenger," Tom, the manager of *The Brass Ass,* says dolefully.

"Let's head back," Lewis says.

I don't wait to watch them leave, but walk inside with Richter. The guardsman on the wall winches the gate shut behind us. "Send someone to get the Sergeant of the Corps here," I say, "the seal has been broken on the pouch."

It's what we are supposed to do if that happens. It doesn't happen often. I sit down on a bed in the watch house while Richter makes coffee, to wait for the Sergeant of the Corps to get here.

Richter is dying to ask what happened out there, but I only want to tell it once. And then I'll resign. I'll tell them it's because the seal was broken—it's a good, *esprit de corps* excuse. A real proof of honor. Maybe I'll take that position in the Household of the Governor of Illinois.

I look at the wall, which makes up one wall of the watch house. I wonder how long it's going to last, before we find out that there are some things you can't keep outside with a wall. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 84).

mov's debut with "Ocean Hammer," taking us to the deserted winter beaches of North Carolina, with a great big storm a-coming, for a very unusual kind of ghost story; popular new writer **Tony Daniel** shows us how sometimes you *can* go home again, sort of, in the lyrical and bittersweet "Sun So Hot I Froze to Death"; and **Robert Reed** takes us to a place "On the Brink of That Bright New World," for a wry and razor-edged little story about some of the less *obvious* effects of those worldshaking Big Events that you watch on the evening news. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our exciting January issue on sale on your newsstands on December 8, 1992.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Vampires and Viruses

Children of the Night
By Dan Simmons
Putnam, $21.95

The rationally explained vampire has become so common that it's practically a subgenre of science fiction. Dan Simmons' *Children of the Night*, as you might expect, is a particularly convincing example.

Try this on for size. Forget stakes through the heart. Forget walking only by night. Forget those damnably inconvenient coffins that one has to cart around. And above all, forget bats. All of these are simply legends that have gathered around a particular family carrying a particular gene. The family originated in Middle Europe. They carry a mutant virus, and the family is and remains a small one; from the original breeding couple, only two thousand at the most, since the trait is recessive-recessive. What this mutant virus does pass on, when it manifests itself, is highly developed regenerative powers, an immensely long life span, and, inevitably, the need to drink blood.

Vlad Tepes (Vlad, the Impaler, the "original" Dracula for those one or two folk that may not know by this time) is still alive as a reclusive American billionaire. The "family" is scattered throughout the world, but wields great power, and has formed a shadow government in Romania for centuries, through all changes in regime. But Vlad is dying and has gone "home" to do so, despite the chaos that reigns in contemporary Romania.

Kate Neuman, a doctor specializing in blood diseases, has gone to Romania just after the fall of Ceausescu as a medical volunteer. She is particularly concerned with the thousands of abandoned children; she in fact adopts one who has caught her attention and emotions because of the peculiar nature of his ailment. Back home, she discovers the nature of the virus and realizes that she has not only the source of the vampire legend, but a probable cure for AIDS and cancer. The baby is kidnaped; as it happens he is the heir to Vlad and the family want him back. Kate returns to Romania in the company of a highly unorthodox priest, and their hair-raising adventures trying to recapture the child in that chaotic society form the bulk of the story. It is both a chase and a quest, as they seek to find out where the child has been taken while being pursued by the forces of the *strigoi*, the undead. At intervals, there's a chapter consisting of the autobiographical musings of the dying

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Vlad; a nasty piece of business he was, too. (He notes that he's read that "silly novel" by Stoker and likes only one thing in it, which happens to be my favorite line also—"Listen to them. The children of the night. What beautiful music they make!"—a *sine qua non* for any dramatic production.)

At one point, Kate says, "My baby has been kidnaped and I'm out playing Indiana Jones," to which the reply is "It wasn't as interesting as Indiana Jones." Not! The climax, only one feature of which is a battle on a helicopter strut above Castle Dracula in the Carpathians, is as good as anything Indy has been through. The problem is that Simmons has set such a high standard for himself that what would be a humdinger from anyone else seems to the reader (or at least this reader) below par for this particular author. (But points for a pretty neat surprise denouement).

One more thing needs mention, also. Simmons's portrayal of life in the anarchic conditions following the fall of the Communist regime in Romania is as scary as anything to do with the *strigoi*; either Simmons has been living there for a couple of years or he's done a brilliant (and speedy) job of research.

Unsafe Sex

Crygender

By Thomas T. Thomas
Baen, $4.99 (paper)

Thomas T. Thomas' *Crygender* comes equipped with a title and a cover that give one pause. The title is certainly one of the more awkward invented words I've run into; I initially kept trying to make it out as a combo of cryonics and gender, which even given the slightly off the wall subject matter didn't make sense. Turns out it's based on *cryptic gender*; it's the name of a major character who is a functioning, artificially produced hermaphrodite. The cover, on the other hand, is one of the most shocking pink covers I've come across—I mean the pink is shocking, not the cover, except for the fact that it's a portrait of Crygender and is pretty inaccurate according to the text.

The setting is early in the next century; sea level has risen and many cities are up to their second stories in water. The character Crygender has appeared more or less out of nowhere, become a media star, and has gone on to run Babylon, a sexually oriented resort on the island formerly called Alcatraz. It is handily owned by the Japanese, so is outside the jurisdiction of U. S. law.

At the heart of the plot are two searches: one by an aging Frenchman, a top World Cop (U.N.), and his American liaison for a German bigwig's young and beautiful daughter whose trail leads to Babylon, and then disappears; the other by a Dutch woman whose motives we are not apprised of, who seeks employment in Babylon. The two searches inevitably cross.

I enjoyed the well paced intrigue that juggles the plot elements, mixes the two searches with the mystery of Crygender's origin as well as his/her eventual demise, and revolves them all around a terrorist attack at a Netherlands airport a decade earlier. I also enjoyed Thomas's view of a flooded world, where most cities have survived

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with boat traffic and moving up a floor or two, still doing business as usual.

However, on the down side, Thomas has put most of his novel in a setting of not very convincing decadent sexuality. It's as if he'd researched it all in the porn section of the local video rental (and what is less erotic?). I also wasn't much convinced by Crygender, who is described as being something like the half-man, half-woman from old freak shows, with the body divided asymmetrically into one half female, one half male, but with both sexual organs placed symmetrically and the head being a mixture of both sexes (silky mustache, lots of eyeliner, shaped brows, etc.) Sounds neither that exotic or that erotic to me. . . .

(The publicity that came with the book went on coyly at some length as to how the publisher was not allowed to even hint at the identity of the author who provided the original idea and plot outline for *Crygender*. Whoever [and I have some idea], it would seem that not all the blame for the problems need fall on Mr. Thomas.)

Heavenly Horse

Horses of Heaven
By Gillian Bradshaw
Bantam, $5.99 (paper)

I missed Gillian Bradshaw's *Horses of Heaven* when it appeared in hardcover. One of the reasons for this was that it was not marketed as a fantasy, and therefore presumably not brought to the notice of reviewers of fantasy and SF. Now the paperback is out, and it *is* being touted as a fantasy, particularly by the blurb on the cover, front: "A spectacular epic of magic, passion and conquest" and back: "It is a time of magic, 140 B.C."

So what is it, Searles? Speak up, don't mutter. Well, er . . . let's say it's as much fantasy as the *Iliad*, where most of what happens is love and death in the far-off world of Heroic Greece and Ilium, and every once in a while the gods will appear for a cameo appearance and stir things up.

Bradshaw's period here (140 B.C., mid-Hellenistic) is much more within our ken, but her choice of locale makes the novel almost as mythic. It's Central Asia, that section beyond the Caspian Sea along the Oxus River that Alexander more or less conquered in passing on the way to India. It is now the Asian countries that used be part of the U.S.S.R. (Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan et al.); a century post-Alexander it was also a collection of small countries (Bactria, Sogdia, Ferghana), most still ruled by Greeks while others have reverted to native rule.

The central locale is Ferghana, whose natives are not all that far removed from a nomadic existence. They believe their best breed of horses, for royalty only, is descended from the legendary horses of the sun. The story is that of the King, a native Saka, who seeks to make common cause with the Greek rulers of Bactria against a nomadic horde pushed south by the Huns. To his surprise, the alliance is clinched by the offer of the Bactrian king's sister in marriage. It is a mismatch—the King is an aging widower, the Queen young, beautiful, and steeped in Greek tradition,

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while a convert to Buddhism (the mixture of cultures is one of the fascinations of this time and place). And there is the King's handsome, good-hearted son (who is a Mazdaist, just to compound acculturation). Obviously a Phaedra–Hippolytus scenario is going to develop, with the difference that both Queen and Prince try desperately to resist, but circumstance forces revelation and flight.

So where's the fantasy? Well, matters are driven by the appearance of the ghost of a wise ancestor, a legendary monster that guards the one pass the lovers might take to freedom, and the timely appearance of one of the original horses of the sun. It's a treat for readers who like their historical novels with a smattering of fantasy. To boot, it has none of the stiffness associated with legend, but is told smoothly by a likably horsy young woman attendant of the Queen's.

From the French (Canadian)

The Silent City

By Elisabeth Vonarburg, translated by Jane Brierley
Bantam, $4.99 (paper)

Elisabeth Vonarburg is a Québecoise who writes in French. Her first novel, *The Silent City,* has won several French SF and/or literary prizes. We get the novel here in translation, a fairly rare event for a science fiction work, and one which I approach with caution, though the credentials of Jane Brierley, the translator in this case, are impeccable. Nevertheless, one is still getting the prose filtered, as it were, and faults can sometimes be those of the translator rather than the author. I point this out first off as a *caveat* for the reader.

The City is one of several redoubts left after pollution, overpopulation, nuclear accidents, and climate changes have more or less reduced humanity to a pretechnological culture. The City is a total environment, providing everything including android simulacra for its long-lived but aging populace. Its dwindling survivors know that they are the last City; the last man to be born there conceives a project of formulating a new race using mutated genes from the humans "Outside"; some have shown remarkable physical abilities of regeneration. A child, Elisa, is born to humans kidnaped from "Outside"; she not only can regenerate, but shape shift totally. She grows up as the last City dwellers die; one electronically leaves his personality pattern to guide her when her "father"/creator goes mad. We follow her story as she continues the project, creating over a hundred children from her own genetic material, shape shifting from male to female. Then comes the inevitable exodus as she and the "children," who have during their lives also varied from female to male, confront the Outside. It is mostly male dominated despite the fact that women outnumber men five to one, but there is also a settlement of "free women" in whose conflict with the males Elisa becomes involved.

The story seems to lack smoothness, proceeding in fits and starts from episode to episode. This, for instance, could be a translation problem; perhaps the original has more flow and continuity. The

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ideas range from the clichéd to the original; these at least we can lay at the author's door.

Golden Age[2]

The Glory That Was

By L. Sprague de Camp
Baen, $4.50 (paper)

L. Sprague de Camp's *The Glory That Was* first appeared in *Startling Stories* in 1952, and later in book form (1960). The Golden Age had not quite faded at that point and *Startling*, despite its name, was giving John Campbell's *Astounding SF* a run for its money in quality. The novel hasn't been available for some time, and anything by a major writer of that period (not that de Camp isn't still going strong) *from* that period is almost bound to be of interest.

Here we have a good example of a work from a time when the aim in SF was to come up with something original, not to clone the last bestseller. This, of course, served up a great variety to the lucky reader. Some of the ideas stuck and became tenets of the field, some were worth only one book or so. The "gimmick" in *The Glory That Was* didn't exactly start a trend—it was a one-book idea—but that doesn't make it any the less fun.

In brief, in the twenty-seventh century, the ruler of the World State has walled off Greece with a force field, and apparently kidnaped any number of citizens. The slightly pompous husband of one persuades a more devil-may-care friend to attempt to see what's happening "inside," and with the help of a convenient lightning storm they break through to the Aegean in a small boat. They're rammed and sunk just off the port of Athens by what is obviously an ancient trireme, and ashore find themselves in what seems to be Periclean Greece.

Have they time traveled or is this some sort of mega-creation? If the latter, how has it been done? In finding the answer, the fun is in the mismatched pair bouncing off historical figures (Pericles, Aspasia, Socrates) and the culture of Greece's Golden Age (which smells strongly of garlic). De Camp knows his Greek culture down to the meanest *chiton*, and the combination of erudition and slapstick is irresistible.

Unpublishable

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass

By Lewis Carroll
Signet, $2.75 (paper)

Why a presumably knowledgeable editor and an experienced publishing house would see fit to release this horrendous novel and its even more horrendous sequel is beyond me. The editor, one assumes, wants something in the way of a professional reputation; the publisher, some monetary return. Neither is likely with these two turkeys.

To begin with, the protagonist is a child. This would automatically categorize the book in publishing circles as a juvenile on the order of *True Grit*, *David Copperfield*, and *Member of the Wedding*. Nevertheless, the publisher seems to think there will be some sort of crossover readership and that adults might actually be interested in this arrant English nonsense. Also everyone knows in the business not to

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publish a book that is too *British*, as being beyond the comprehension of the average American. What does the average American know of cucumber frames, dormice, croquet, or even "looking glasses," for heaven's sakes? It should at least been retitled *Through the Mirror*. And the cover shows a mad hatter (???) wearing a hat marked $10/^6$, utterly inscrutable to people in this country.

As for content, arrant nonsense indeed. We've learned that fantasies should make sense. But this surrealist mishmash is hopelessly confused. The sequel indeed tries for a certain coherence with the tired old device of basing the plot on a chess game, but that soon dissolves into confusion. And this is not to mention some execrable poetry, in which if the author could not find a rhyme, he simply made up a word. Toves and borogroves indeed!

There are also some unfortunate rumors about the sexual proclivities of the pseudonymous author. No overt moral charges can be laid, it's true. Perhaps if there were a public scandal, bookstores might find the book worth stocking, but in the absence of such, one can only advise retailers and readers to avoid Alice's atrocious adventures.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . Mike Resnick's first collection of short stories is engagingly titled *Will the Last Person To Leave the Planet Please Shut Off the Sun?* after one of the included stories (Tor, $18.95) . . . "In space, no one can hear you meow . . ." is the painful publicity tag attached to what looks like an amusing collection: *Cats in Space . . . and Other Places* edited by Bill Fawcett (Baen, $4.99 paper).

Science fiction non-fiction . . . Ever wondered what an agent does? (You're not alone if so—many professionals are baffled at times.) You might get a clue— and an amusing one—from *Fool For an Agent* by an authentic member of the profession, Richard Curtis (Writer's Notebook Press, Pulphouse Publishing, $5, paper).

Sequels, prequels, and whatnot . . . Book Three of Charles Sheffield's intriguing series, "The Heritage Universe," is *Transcendence* (Del Rey, $18) . . . And from L. E. Modesitt, Jr., another novel about the subtle magic of Recluse, going back to its foundation in *The Towers of the Sunset* (Tor, $21.95) . . . In *Blood Trillium*, Julian May continues what she, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and Andre Norton began with *Black Trillium* (Bantam, $20).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Ninth Annual Collection*, edited by Gardner Dozois (St. Martin's, $27.95 cloth, $15.95 paper); *The New Hugo Winners II*, edited with introductions by Isaac Asimov (Baen, $4.99 paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 Rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Dr. Asimov was the Guest of Honor at the first con(vention) I ever ran. We shall not see his like again. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons, give your name and reason for calling right off. When writing, send an SASE. Look for me with the Filthy Pierre badge.

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13-15—**PhilCon.** For info, write: **Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101.** Or phone: **(609)764-8294** (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Adam's Mark Hotel. Guests will include: Greg Bear, Boris Vallejo. The 56th annual.

13-15—**SciCon. (804) 591-2361.** Holiday Inn Executive Center, Virginia Beach VA. E. Scarborough.

13-15—**Dreamworks. (407) 488-2822.** Chicago IL. A dozen actors from Star Trek: The Next Generation.

14-15—**FortFest. (703) 522-9232.** Near Washington DC. The original unexplained-phenomena people.

20-22—**SoonerCon. (405) 682-6462.** Oklahoma City OK. No more on this con as we go to press.

20-22—**OryCon. (503) 283-0802.** Red Lion Columbia River, Portland OR. Esther Friesner.

20-22—**PhenomiCon.** Castlegate Hotel, Atlanta GA. W. Gibson, B. Sterling, I. Storg, K. Thornley.

20-22—**Leonard Nimoy Convention. (081) 997-7755.** Nottingham, England. Mr. Nimoy will not attend.

27-29—**LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. (818)760-9234.** LAX Marriott. Hambly.

27-29—**Darkover Grand Council, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. (202) 737-4609.** M. Z. Bradley.

27-29—**ConTex, Box 266996, Houston TX 77207. (713) 526-5626.** They expect 400 members.

27-29—**Visions, 1434 Somerset Ave., Deerfield IL 60015 (708) 945-2946.** Chicago IL. Multi-média.

27-29—**Starbase Indy, Box 50684, Indianapolis IN 46250. (317) 899-5846.** A Star Trek convention.

27-29—**Creation, 530 Riverdale Dr., Glendale CA 91204. (818) 409-0690.** New York NY. Comic/media.

DECEMBER 1992

3-7—**Nordcon, % GKF, Box 76, Gdansk 37 80-325, Poland. (48-58) 431-073.** Polish SF clubs' con.

4-6—**DraCon, Box 36, Brno 612 00, Czechoslovakia.** Dates estimated; held sometime in December.

11-13—**SMOFCon, 8331 Donoghue, New Carrollton MD 20784.** New Orleans LA. Con runners talk shop.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$85/US$75.

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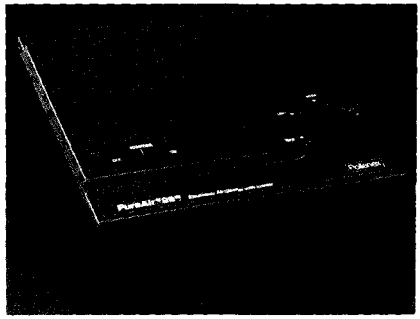

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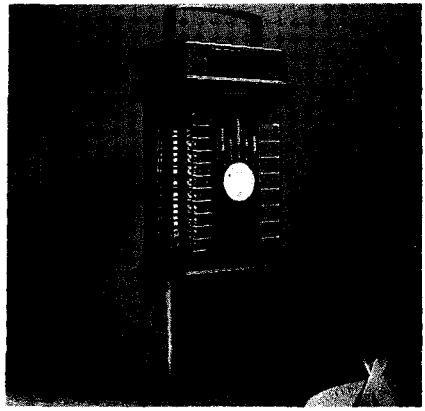

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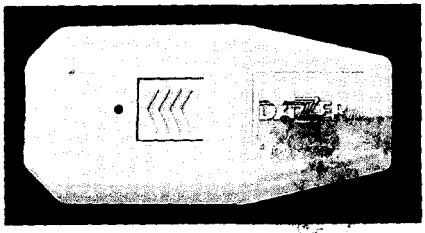

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